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NEW WRITINGS IN

SF.25

EDITED BY KENNETH BULMER

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NEW WRITINGS IN SF.25 EDITED BY KENNETH BULMER

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edited by

Kenneth Bulmer

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FOREWORD

by

KENNETH BULMER

CONTRARY to the generally held belief of those who know little or nothing about sf, science fiction does not claim to foretell or predict the future.

That is, reputable sf writers do not make this claim for their work. One of the important functions of sf does lie in this area of prophecy; but it should be noted that the operative factor is just that, prophecy. An sf writer will spell out what might happen in the future, what could happen, and indicate options that might affect the course of events so that, for example, futures no one would wish for their children can be averted.

Over the last twenty years or so, bodies of professional men in a variety of causes have dedicated themselves to the task of accurately saying what will happen in the future, and many of their predictions have been parallels of the many future worlds of sf. Reality of course has an untidy habit of making sudden and world-shaking changes so that all these careful and businesslike and painstaking attempts at accurate, hard-and-fast, one future only, predictions are at a stroke rendered meaningless. This is scarcely likely to happen to the multi-valued and many-layered futures discussed within the sf field.

To turn to another aspect of the sf field, it is noticeable that there has come recently from the U.S. a spate of anthologies arranged around a single theme. Single theme anthologies, it is true to say, have become a major publishing gimmick. From the earliest days of *New Writings in SF* it was established that this collection should endeavour to

present as wide and colourful a variety of sf themes as possible from volume to volume. Inevitably some volumes grouped themselves naturally around a central theme or themes, and so once again pioneered in the sf form. This will clearly occur again from time to time with future volumes; but it is manifestly the concern of *New Writings in SF* to deal with all those themes that have at heart the well-being of both this world and the worlds of the future.

It is with great pleasure that I present in this volume a new story by a German sf author. Science fiction in Germany has a long and honourable tradition and many issues of the first U.S. scientifiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, carried translations of German stories. To a casual observer, the German scene today appears to be dominated by space opera; but as Wolfgang Jeschke's story shows, other material is being produced. The manner of telling, too, comes in a refreshingly different style from those to which, perhaps, we English-speaking readers have become accustomed. Part of the introduction to the story was written by the author and the form this introduction takes follows from Herr Jeschke's own method of presentation. The story has been translated by Peter Roberts, a young sf enthusiast well known in the amateur publishing field.

In normal circumstances to make planetfall a spaceship must battle her way down against gravity. Colin Kapp comes up with the intrepid spaceman who, to make planetfall, must climb *up* a rope to the planetary surface. In considering the problem that Sydney Bounds looked at in MONITOR in volume 22, Donald Malcolm comes up with a conclusion that will not please everybody.

Returning to this Earth, both John Rackham and Michael Stall present us with examples of illusionary spin off from attempts at reality manipulation. Sydney Bounds has a short way with those deluded souls who seek something for nothing in this or any other world.

Two writers whose first published sf work appeared in recent volumes of *New Writings in SF* return with stories that illuminate areas of the human spirit too often neglected

by sf of the past. Martin Ricketts successfully combines a number of elements into a whole that initially may create a reaction of total rejection. Perhaps the best help I can offer is to suggest that while human nature is relatively plastic it does not change as fast as the eager among us would wish. Charles Partington is moving into a niche within the sf field that promises to be excitingly rewarding as this far from simple story herewith indicates.

Here are nine brand new science fiction stories that in a variety of ways not only stimulate but also entertain.

KENNETH BULMER

Horsmonden,
December 1973.

RICE BRANDY

by

MICHAEL STALL

In the Western World, François Villon's passionate though hopeless plea to change the world closer to his heart's desire, finds strange Eastern echoes in this atmospheric story of a Khmer might-have-been. This is Michael Stall's second story for New Writings in SF *and is markedly different in tone from his 'The Five Doors' appearing in Volume #23. The peaceful, easy, happy world is a desire we all seek; but who is prepared to pay the blood sacrifice?*

RICE BRANDY

One

As ever, the Thai were proving troublesome. If they were not checked, their depredations would prove the ruin of Khmer Civilisation, but how were they to be checked? As ever, Jayavarman, King of the Khmers and Devaraja of Kambuja, could think of no solution. It was ironic that he, who could call an army of four millions to the field, could do nothing to halt the raids from the North. But his army was a paper army; the peasants of whom it was exclusively composed were ever anxious to return to their paddies, and began to discharge themselves after only a few weeks campaigning; how could he commit them to the jungle, to face the Thai, as sly and half as wild as the Moi and infinitely more terrible? Even his great namesake, the seventh of his name, could not have subdued the Thai as he had thrashed the Chams. The Devaraja had gazed on his ancestor's face, magnified and multiplied in stone and gold at the Bayon, and prayed for guidance. In vain.

The sun was low in the sky. Surely his vigil was almost over. Spending every evening in this way, waiting for the Snake Queen who never came, was unspeakably tedious, but custom demanded it. Han, his favourite, would inform him when he might decently leave. He sighed. Sometimes he found himself doubting the existence of the Gods, and the validity of the religion initiated by Gautama with which they co-existed. He agreed with the Court Brahmans that the version of Buddhism being spread by missionary bonzes among the peasants, the Hinayana, held the seeds of abhor-

rent egalitarianism, but he was also powerless to change that.

There was a tap on the door. 'You can leave now, sire,' Han said, opening it and prostrating himself.

'For the sake of the Gods, get up. I get more than enough of that in public to desire it in private, but you know that. You thought that I might be in a bad mood? Get up, I can't jump over you.' Jayavarman paused. 'You're right, I am. But tell me if you have heard anything more about the latest incursion of the Thai? And I would welcome any advice about what I should do, exclusive of prayers and hecatombs.'

'There's nothing new to relate, sire,' Han said, smiling. 'And my advice is to forget about it.'

'What?'

'We can't afford to go to war with them, and there'd be little plunder if we did. We couldn't even catch them in the jungle. Such pinpricks as they can manage should be ignored. If a war cost the peasants a harvest then, charisma or not, there'd be a—a tricky situation.'

'I ought to have you flayed alive,' Jayavarman said good-naturedly, 'but you're quite right. And yet the Thai must be stopped.'

Han shrugged. 'It'll be a long time before they can really hurt us. Not in our time. And who knows, we might ally with the Chinese.'

'They'd gain nothing from it, why should they bother? I suppose we could always arm slaves.'

'The Lolos and the Moi? They'd slaughter us and return to the jungle.'

The Devaraja nodded. 'So I should build a few wats, improve my lingam sanctuary, and hope for the best.'

'"Place your trust in the Gods" is, I believe, the conventional phrase.'

'Blasphemy; I think I really should introduce Buddhism; even my priests are sceptics,' Jayavarman laughed.

'That also is for the future,' Han smiled.

Two—*Phnom Penh, 23rd October, 1962*

I PICKED my way carefully through the crowded streets, almost oblivious of the curious glances the Khmers bestowed on a farang, an alien. In three years excavating around Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, I had grown used to them. It must have been the rush hour; I remember being thankful that my comparative excess of height allowed me to avoid the squalls of youths who, with energy and exaggerated purpose, cut a swath through the apparently random motion of their elders. It was all very different from Bangkok, which seemed quite modern in comparison. Western clothes were the exception, the rule being a Cambodian version of the sarong topped by a kind of tunic coat. There were even a few saffron-robed bonzes in evidence, protecting their shaven heads with over-large umbrellas. The streets were satisfyingly empty of brash and incongruous American cars; I saw only a few old Citroens and a smattering of *cycle-pousses*.

I caught myself listening, trying to decipher the fast, tonal rattle of Khmer, using the simple expedient of considering it Siamese. Both members of the Sino-Tibetan group, there were enough cognates to allow me to construct shaky edifices, insufficient to prevent them clattering down to a rubble of nonsense syllables. I had learnt enough Khmer on the plane from Bangkok to Phnom Penh to allow me to accept or refuse any proposition made me, unfortunately in complete ignorance of its nature, but I was secure in the knowledge that I could always fall back on French, a variant of which, using the infinitive of the verb on all occasions, is almost universal.

At last I reached the turning and saw the tenement. Madame Quo lived on the third floor. I had the sudden desire to turn and see if anyone was watching me, but resisted. There was something ridiculous, even shameful in visiting a soothsayer, even in Phnom Penh, and this would be the second visit of the day. I had been in the morning

with Jean Beranger who had elected himself my guide and mentor in things Cambodian for the two weeks of my vacation.

'The first thing we must do, is have your fortune told,' he had said, meeting me that morning in the foyer of the *Hôtel du Cambodge*. He had greeted me at the airport the night before; at his behest I had begun my vacation by getting drunk on *saké* in a newly-opened Japanese restaurant while comparing the respective lots of Swedish archaeologists and French journalists. I had vague memories of the journey back to the hotel perched precariously in the front of a swaying *cycle-pousse*.

Three

Beranger drove us to Madame Quo's in a dusty '59 Citroen. After a hazardous journey up three flights of rickety steps and a walk down the length of a corridor that sported, as well as cracked plaster, large spiders that I carefully avoided, we entered Madame Quo's room. A small scarfaced man admitted us, closing the door softly behind us. Madame Quo sat in the far corner surrounded by burning joss sticks, her face hidden in shadow, the scanty light from the window playing on her tattooed arms which displayed poorly-executed seven-headed nagas, the design copied, Beranger explained later, from the ruined Temple of Preah Pulilay, famous for its multi-headed serpent gods. She muttered something to the scarfaced man who placed a lighted candle before her.

She was very old, how old I couldn't guess, but separated from death more by months than years. Her tiny, withered body was encased in a long, dark blue gown, tied at the waist with a twist of saffron cloth; her head was almost hairless, greyish skin crinkling around dark, sunken eyes that glittered in the candlelight.

'Sitting,' the scarfaced man said in tortured French. We crouched on the floor and waited. I was bored; I had often wondered how an otherwise intelligent man such as Ber-

anger could interest himself in such stuff. We had known each other for many years and throughout that time his interest in such phenomena had grown more and more passionate.

'I can help you, gentlemen?' she asked slowly, in heavily accented but otherwise passable French.

'Will you reveal my friend's future?' Beranger asked.

'Is there anything you would like especially to know?' she asked, looking directly at me.

'My friend is an archaeologist: tell him which of the sites he is excavating will yield significant results,' Beranger said when I failed to answer.

She turned her face to the floor and began chanting in a low voice, not in Khmer but in Sanskrit, the Latin of Indo-China; she flexed the muscles of her scrawny forearms so that the nagas writhed. The scarfaced man moved the candle, plunging her body once again into shadow but leaving her face illuminated. Her chanting remained steady and rhythmical. I felt myself falling asleep; the air was heavy with the burning of joss sticks and the rhythm of her chanting drummed at my consciousness. I tried to resist, but the sensation grew stronger; the nagas on her half-obscured arms jerked spasmodically, and I was unconscious.

'*Mår du bra?*' Beranger was shaking me.

'*Jag mår bra*—I'm all right,' I replied in my native language, and continued in French. 'I must have fallen asleep.'

The chanting had stopped, the candle was out and I could only distinguish the outline of Madame Quo's face.

'Let's be going,' Beranger said. Then to the old woman; 'How much?'

'Is strange your future, *Mssié*,' Madame Quo said, momentarily slipping into pidgin.

'Another time,' Beranger said brusquely, 'how much?'

'I have an answer for your question: the fourth letter of the alphabet.'

'How much do we owe you?' I asked, speaking to her for the first time.

'Nothing, you can pay when you return.' Beranger shook

his head and offered several coins to the scarfaced man who after exchanging glances with the old woman, turned away.

'Come on,' Beranger said, pocketing the money. 'Let's get some fresh air.'

I followed, puzzled.

Four

I was stopped before the tenement by a middle-aged Khmer who pushed a French-language newspaper at me. I read the headline. 'Confrontation at U.N.—Secretary-General Appeals to Belligerents.' The Khmer pulled the paper away and held out his hand. I paid him. It was the easiest way of getting rid of him and the headline had intrigued me; was the use of 'belligerents' merely a sample of Khmer directness, or had the situation really worsened? I learned from the angular French prose that it had. I discarded the paper and began the ascent.

Beranger had sown the seeds of the return visit while we were driving back to the hotel. 'The fourth letter, D—wasn't it at the site D that you found the Old Chinese inscription?'

'Did I say that last night? I can't remember, but that's not surprising. Yes, it was found at site D.' I recalled my excitement, which turned out to be a little premature, at the thought of shedding more light on the time when the Thai, driven south by the Mongol-ruled Chinese, finally destroyed the Empire of Kambuja, forcing the Khmers east into present-day Cambodia, sacking Angkor and carving out a country on the northern shores of the Gulf of Siam.

How had she known? A guess? From these doubts grew a strange compulsion to return, and when Beranger had to leave for Siem Reap, near Angkor, I yielded to it.

When no one answered, I opened the door to find the room in darkness.

'Madame Quo?'

A light flared in Madame Quo's corner, and I could

see her lighting the candle with a long, spindly yellow match.

'Did I frighten you?' she tittered, the nagas writhing as she spoke; they seemed so real that had they detached themselves and slithered to the floor I would have been frightened but not surprised.

'I frightened you before. I told you the truth; that's always frightening.'

She raised her arms and arched her fingers, which she had lengthened with some kind of silver appendage that glittered in the candlelight.

'What do you wish to know?'

'What are those things on your fingers?'

I could think of nothing else to ask; the compulsion had no specific purpose. She held out her hand towards me. Her fingers were capped in cones of silver paper. I was not surprised; lacquered imitations of pith helmets were common enough in Thailand.

'I must go,' I said, climbing to my feet, suddenly very embarrassed.

'No,' she said, a flicker of some unidentifiable emotion caressing the wrinkles of her shrunken face. I was turning to go when the sirens began.

'Don't go,' she said; the wrinkles of her face were momentarily ironed out, her voice deepened, and the nagas danced on her arms. She opened her mouth wide, exposing the rotten remains of her teeth, and screamed against the blare of the sirens. The scream changed abruptly into a death rattle; I had a moment of intense compassion as I slid to the floor, into a black maelstrom.

Five

'They don't like it, I'm afraid,' Han said. 'Taking the slaves from Temple building for the High Dam on the Mekong. There was even some talk that it was impious; I soon put a stop to that, but I can't stop them from thinking it.'

'The peasants will be behind me when their crops thrive

and their harvests are trebled because of better irrigation,' the Devaraja said.

'The Aristocracy and the Priesthood,' Han said in low Khmer, indicating contempt. Caste had penetrated even the language, there being low, priestly and royal forms. The low Khmer words stood out from the flow of royal Khmer, so that the Jayavarman smiled at his friend's loyalty.

'The Aristocracy and the Priesthood,' Han repeated, 'are very unhappy that the new Royal School admits all, including slaves, who can pass the examinations, and teaches neither Pali nor Sanskrit.'

'I am the Devaraja, the God-king. They shall abide by my decisions.'

'But why is it so, sire, if not for the customs? And they feel you have broken with the customs.'

'They will not act before the harvest, and by then it will be too late. I know this, Han, even as I feel the compulsion to do what I must do.'

Six

IT WAS dusk; I was sitting in a deserted children's playground before a slide made entirely of polished aluminium alloy, to a very functional design. Positioned around me were swings and roundabouts and various pieces of apparatus I had not met with before, all made from the same metal. The playground was bordered on one side by tall glass and aluminium buildings whose blank, austere surfaces were occasionally punctuated by dull, glowing lights; on the other sides were fields and the silhouettes of sugar palms. I realised that I was on the outskirts of a city, but which city I had no idea. I tried to get up, but could not. I felt drained of energy. I crawled to the base of the slide and pulled myself to my feet. The playground careened about me. I almost fell, then everything righted itself. I felt groggy and utterly exhausted, and the temptation to lie and sleep on the slide was almost too much for me, but I decided that

it was imperative that I find out where I was and what had happened.

I mounted the moving causeway just outside the playground. It moved quite slowly, and had a handrail: it was obviously designed for children. About one hundred yards ahead it met with the real causeway which I could see was divided into five lanes and was banked. On the highest lane I could see people moving at about thirty miles an hour. Something was very wrong, but tiredness and the utter silence of the city—I could hear my heart beating—helped me maintain a numbed calm. Even the design of the towering buildings suggested an all-pervading calm.

I mounted the slowest of the lanes and began to move into the city. No one payed me the slightest attention. The other passengers were dressed in varicoloured coveralls for the most part, although some wore sarongs, and a very few what I took to be individual creations. No one talked, they all seemed to be travelling separately. I mounted the next lane; the city slid slowly past me, hard, austere, even beautiful. The architecture was odd, but I could not pinpoint the oddness. But that didn't matter; only the calmness mattered.

It was like a drug, I thought, and dismounted hurriedly: the calm was the stillness of a baited trap.

I found myself facing a large, lighted window. I walked up to it and looked in. It was a bar. I looked about for a door, but saw none; then the glass of the window split down the middle and parted for me to enter. I went in and was greeted by the susurration of many voices, laughter and the clink of glasses. The bar occupied the whole length of the room, its unattended surface littered with full glasses of every conceivable concoction. I helped myself, sat down at an empty table and waited for someone to come around for the money; I was not very surprised when no one came.

I must have dozed, for when I next looked up the bar was empty. I walked to the door-window and looked out; the buildings were huge moon-lit sepulchres surrounded by

haloes of diamond-bright stars. I moved my hand in the direction of the window. It opened.

Above the window, on the outside, there was a sign in small gold letters. Khmer letters.

SEVEN

I WOKE to the sound of a girl singing softly, unaccompanied. The song was sentimental, making great play with the image of moonlight on the rippling surface of the Mekong. It was several seconds before I realised the song was in Khmer. I opened my eyes and blinked at the room I was in. Walls, ceiling and door were a very pale blue, sunlight streamed in through the window on to the white linen of the bed, and on to a girl in a grey coverall who stood by it, watching me. She was tall, with white, close-cropped hair and startlingly pale green eyes set in a broad Khmer face.

'Do you understand?' she asked.

'Yes, I do.' The words came easily.

'I thought you'd take it first time. In case you're wondering, you've been taught Khmer mechanically. There's absolutely nothing wrong with you, mentally or physically, but you were exhausted.'

'Where am I?' I asked, careless of banality.

'The Silver Palace, by the Tonle Sap, and the date is the 296th of the 2505 Buddhist Era. That is A.D. 1962.'

'That's the right date. I was beginning to think . . .'

'Beranger told us to tell you that. We no longer use that system of reckoning. Incidentally, I can talk to you in Swedish if you like. I learnt it while you were learning Khmer.'

'No, it doesn't matter. But who are you?'

'My name is Yuu Li Quat, and I'm a *me-phoum*, which means literally a village headman. Really a welfare officer, or something like that.'

'I wouldn't have mistaken you for a village headman; but for God's sake tell me what I'm doing here.'

'You might say Jean Beranger brought you.'

She had used the name once before, but only now did it impinge on my consciousness, sweet with the promise of a return to sanity. I waited.

'Beranger says that you both come from a parallel time-track,' she said, carefully. 'And although scientifically it's nonsense, we can't deny that you're here. You're world, he says, wasn't conquered and industrialised by the Khmers before the end of the fifteenth century.'

I could think of nothing to say.

Eight

It was the dry season, and the Tonle Sap was at low water. The tiny silver fish darted away from the pirogue's path as we glided forward, flecking the mirror surface with our silver wake. I was sitting at the prow, looking backwards, shielding my eyes with my right arm. Yuu Li sat at the stern, immaculate in a cloth of gold coverall over which she had draped sarong-like a length of embroidered crimson silk. Her hand poised over the small grey box that powered the pirogue.

'Do you think you could handle it?' she asked.

'I think so,' I replied, and almost toppled into the water as we exchanged positions.

'Don't touch the power controls, will you? You don't know enough about them yet.'

'Don't worry. I'm too frightened of going up in a mushroom cloud, however safe you say this little fusion plant is.'

She laughed. 'The worst that could happen would be that we had to paddle back to shore.'

On the shore of the freshwater lake, the stilt-raised Silver Palace burned in the sun. It derived its name from the fact that the stupa was entirely covered in superbly worked sheet silver. It had been begun in 2167 B.E., when the Khmer Empire had really been an Empire instead of the free association into which it had progressed, and for a century had been the private retreat of the Devaraja. I let my eyes

dwell on the silver tower, and thought how the Silver Palace mirrored the general progression; now it served as a reorientation centre for two refugees from another world. Then Yuu Li gaily advised me that we were off course.

'I was looking at the Palace,' I said by way of excuse.

'It's quite pretty,' she said unenthusiastically. 'We thought you might like it, and nobody else is keen on living in a palace.'

I laughed, and was gently constrained to explain.

'I wish Beranger was as well reorientated as you,' she said. 'If he would only let Dr. Srang help him . . . In your old world you say he was very interested in psi, but here he is afraid of it. If we could only enter his mind!'

'I talked to him, but he wouldn't listen. Perhaps he's frightened of telepathy because he wants to keep secret his method of crossing between timetracks?'

'We think we know that.'

'Yes?'

'You wouldn't understand,' she said firmly. Too firmly. I knew she was lying, but I also knew I would get no more out of her. I noticed her tapping her fingers on the side of the pirogue, worried, as if she were frightened that she had already said too much.

'I wonder how things are on the other timetrack?' I said. 'There was a war-scare on when I so unexpectedly left. It might be all cinders now.'

I had intended it to shock her, knowing her whole culture's destination of violence and made petulant by the denial of information, but it had no effect on her. We glided along in silence for several minutes.

'Dr. Srang has arranged that we four visit Angkor tomorrow.'

'For some kind of therapy?'

'You could say that.'

'I'll be pleased to go. I once visited it before, in my old world. The Thai had sacked it in 1431, but it was still one of the great monuments of the world. You're really very lucky that Jayavarman VIII industrialised his Empire, and sur-

feited the world of violence and war by the fifteenth century. I wonder how many people are dying by violence in my old world at this moment?'

She made no reply.

Nine

Jayavarman with his favourite Han beside him stood waiting on the Royal Platform, for the waters to turn, for the flooded Tonle Sap to disgorge her waters into the lowering Mekong.

'You have ordered that the dams be opened, sire?' Han asked.

'Yes, you needn't worry. The loyal crowd would probably have stoned us if I hadn't, but we must do something about it next year. There's a great deal of power in the waters and we waste it shamefully. Perhaps we could even pipe it to the fields?'

'We have irrigation canals and shadoofs to irrigate the fields, sire.'

'That's inefficient. I have thought of a way to pipe it. It will mean a great deal of work; we'll have to start a factory for making pipes and replacements, but the increased yield will justify it. I've also thought of something else, a way of getting power from the dams; it's a kind of waterwheel, but it's fixed at right angles to the flow of the water; I've coined the word "turbine" for it.'

'The way you get your ideas,' Han said, 'it almost makes me believe that there are Gods!'

'Who knows?' Jayavarman replied, 'but I . . .'

He was interrupted by a great shout from the crowd; the waters had turned.

Ten

In the old world the city and temple at Angkor, Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat respectively, had been discovered in the jungle by a French naturalist in the year 1860,

whereupon France had stretched the Siamese/French-Cambodian border to include them; a high-handed action, but perhaps justified by the fact that the Siamese had no better use for them than as a stone quarry. The old Wat had been huge, but the one I saw now amazed me. It was in fact a succession of Wats surrounding the original moated one, all in different styles, but everyone recognisably Khmer, most of them Buddhist in inspiration unlike the Hindu inspired original. Khmer culture had spread the Buddhism of the Theravada, sometimes known as the Hinayana, the lesser vehicle, throughout the world, no longer occupying its time with the way to Nirvana.

'It's damn big,' Beranger said, his voice an unpleasant blend of lassitude and bitterness.

'It's a museum,' Srang explained, 'architecturally, as you can see; inside, the outer sections are devoted to Khmer Art; that is, World Art.'

'And the inner section, the old Wat?'

'That remains as it was, even to the bas-reliefs depicting war and slaughter; origins cannot be denied, even though they are appalling.'

'No,' Beranger agreed mildly, so mildly that Srang looked at him searchingly but said nothing, 'No, you can't deny them, however much they appal you.'

I cannot imagine what therapeutic value Srang thought the museum could have for Beranger. We walked the long, glossy corridors, looking at exhibits that ranged from old Khmer heads smiling benignly and enigmatically down from glass cases that, explained Srang, protected them from the humidity and not the curious fingers of humanity, to *pointilliste* landscapes and tortured faces in a dark wood I could not identify.

'I thought you had banished pain and misery, Doctor,' Beranger said, sneeringly.

'There is no avoidable pain or unhappiness. People still die, things remain unachieved, people still have to search for their own meaning. Not everyone finds it, but general telepathy destroys the need to hurt others. If you would

only give me permission . . . You've quite a gift, but it's erratic. We could teach you; we're teaching your companion.'

'I'm a willing, if not very able student,' I said.

'Goddamn moralist,' Beranger muttered, sourly.

'No,' Yuu Li said. 'He's told you how things are, not how he desires them to be.'

The corridors seemed interminable; the paintings and sculptures fused together in my mind, becoming a progression of styles, going beyond my understanding. I noticed the shadows lengthening on the glossy floor.

'Now we eat,' Yuu Li said at last, 'and tonight we'll see dancing in the old Wat. It has some kind of religious significance which Srang will explain over dinner; he enjoys that kind of nonsense.'

Srang laughed. 'I'll never persuade you, will I?' He turned to Beranger. 'It interests me only as an anthropologist,' he said, apologetically, 'I wouldn't want you to think . . .'

'Of course,' Beranger said wearily.

Eleven

'You want to go back,' I told Beranger when we were alone.

'Yes.'

'I don't understand. I feel as if I've wandered into Faery, and my only fear is that it is too good to be true, that it must turn sour.'

'It's true, and it won't turn sour; but it's terrible.'

'Why?'

'Because they pity me.'

I was about to contradict him, and then I stopped myself. He was speaking the truth. They could not avoid pitying him, and even though their pity was not mixed with condescension and contempt, it was real enough.

'Is there a world back there? It might be a radioactive ruin.'

'You have never asked me anything about the trans-

ference, have you?'

'Yuu Li said you wouldn't talk about it.'

'Not to her, but to you . . . What does she know about it? I take it you've asked her.'

'She said something about parallel worlds, but didn't seem to believe it.'

'Neither would I. It was just some trash I had thought up for the occasion.' He paused. 'We must go back, you can't imagine the guilt!'

'No,' I snapped.

'You must.'

I was about to reply when I saw Srang and Yuu Li approaching.

'It's all arranged,' he said, 'we can go to the Wat now. It's one of my great pleasures, and you'll probably become addicted.'

Twelve

The troupe consisted of fifty dancers, all arrayed in gold, red and green, with gilt helmets topped by towering, pagoda-like finials. Their faces were almost spectral, pale and controlled, as they danced in the moonlight between the huge bas-reliefs showing the bloody conquests of the Khmer Kings, interspersed with serene gargoyles of the Gods. Srang was enraptured, his pudgy hands clasped before him in wonderment, almost in prayer. Yuu Li seemed bored. I had little interest in the superbly conducted gyrations of the dancers; dancing is the one visual art that holds no appeal for me. I was also very frightened.

'Can I talk?' I asked Yuu Li, tapping her shoulder.

'If you whisper.'

'There is only one world, isn't there?' She must have recognised the urgency in my voice, for she nodded almost immediately.

The idea had been developing in my mind since my conversation with Beranger. I had once read a story about a man going back in time to kill his own grandfather, out of curiosity, to see if he would still exist. To change the world

required less effort; you merely changed the thoughts of a single man and if you picked the right man, at the right time, you had a new world and found yourself in it. The only way to go back was to undo what you had done. And Beranger wanted to go back.

The dance had an almost hypnotic effect, the pale, gold-crowned faces flashing regularly as they danced in the moonlight, their rings glittering with each precise, meaningful motion of the hands, like a magnet drawing the metallic consciousness into the endless, engulfing labyrinth of Being, of non-existence. My thoughts blurred, not as if I were falling asleep, but almost consciously sliding towards . . . I shook my head as if to dispel the muzziness, and turned away from the dance; it made no difference. I looked around for Beranger. He was not there.

I climbed to my feet and hurried down one of the side corridors, into a well illumined maze, sure of my way; the blurring sensation changed, but did not grow more powerful.

I found him crouched on a balcony, his hands covering his face. He looked up as he heard my footsteps.

'You're not co-operating,' he said accusingly.

'I don't want to go.'

'Don't force me to leave you here to die!'

I didn't reply, and noticed that his face changed slightly, as if he had reached a decision.

'It took me five years of planning, of mastering a language, a history, a way of life. I discovered my talent early, and I never abused it. I examined, learned to understand the minds of the past. I searched for the optimum solution, and I found it. I would abuse my power just once, by moulding Jayavarman's mind, and that only to make the world a decent place. I played God. This is my creation.' He paused.

'But I'm not cut out to be a God. The guilt is too terrible. You see I've destroyed the old world more completely than any bombs could; it's as if it never existed.'

'This world exists.'

He took no notice of me. 'I couldn't kill you with the rest of the world, so I brought you with me. You were my only true friend.'

I noticed the past tense.

'I had to be in Angkor, and I had to work alone, so I used the old woman as an amplifier. She was a telepath, rather erratic, but good. It had taken me years to find her, but the strain killed her the first time I used her. When I change Jayavarman's mind again, she will be dead.' His voice was heavy with guilt and shame.

'You must relax, empty your mind. If you don't, you force me to leave you.'

I realised that I couldn't allow him to destroy the world he had initiated, whatever his motives. My own motives were desperately unclear, a mixture of altruism and contentment, perhaps, but they left me in no doubt as to what action should be taken. I moved towards him.

Thirteen

The dancing had stopped. The crowd separated and made a path for me as I walked. Srang and Yuu Li were kneeling over the body.

'He's dead,' Yuu Li said. 'The fall smashed his skull.'

'It was necessary,' I said in a neutral voice.

'It was wrong to kill him,' Srang said softly. 'Terribly wrong.'

I began to explain, but Srang cut me short. 'You had no right to his life.'

I moved nearer the body. They backed away a little, without hate or violence in their faces. They pitied even a murderer. I knelt down and lay my hand on the bloody, smashed head. I suddenly thought: what man had ever done more for the human race, with the help of my crime—his murder? I forced myself to look at his pulped head; the grey mess of the brains oozed out slowly, pathetically, like the stuffing from a rag doll. It was not the head of a Slain God.

I stood up and extended my blooded palm theatrically towards Srang.

'I don't deny my guilt, Srang, but I would be even more guilty if I were free of his blood.'

Someone pinioned my arms.

'Let him go,' Yuu Li said softly, 'he's quite safe.' She knelt down and smeared her hands with blood. 'Surely there's some significance in this, Srang, but which do you prefer, Original Sin or the Slain God?' She walked forward and disengaged the arms that pinioned me.

'We all wanted him dead. We knew he would be forced to go back, nobody can destroy a world and survive it. This was the only way, and only you could kill him.' She turned about and faced the crowd. 'Do we need a Scapegoat?'

Srang bent down and blooded his hand. 'We still need ceremonies, it seems,' he said ruefully.

Fourteen

There was no doubt: Jayavarman the Great, Devaraja of Kambuja, Emperor of China, Emperor of India, Lord of the New Found Lands far to the south and east, Lord of Africa (this last was a lie) and Master of Constantinople was dying. He lay on his huge bed, a tiny, withered figure, wrapped at his own command in white, the colour of mourning, surrounded by Brahmans, saffron-robed bonzes, and a host of secretaries, courtiers and wives.

'Speak, Lord of the Earth, that your words may be carried as far as the Winds blow . . .'

Tell us the name of your successor, so that we may kill or follow, depending on our inclination, the Devaraja translated for himself. He remained silent.

'Order, Divinity of Khmer, that we who prostrate ourselves before you may do your least bidding, though it consumes our very lives.'

Jayavarman stopped listening.

'Let the secret of my distilled rice wine be given to the world, to mark my death,' he said weakly.

There was a stir in the room.

It was the only innovation that didn't come to me in a vision, he thought; then the agony in his chest re-asserted itself.

THE CAT AND THE COIN

by

KEITH WELLS

Keith Wells makes his science fiction debut in the pages of New Writings in SF *with a story in which the Comic Spirit lays about itself to the general discomfiture of all concerned. Well—almost all. If the famous and long-touted Helping Hand from Space ever does make touchdown on this knocked about old planet of ours, its bearers are just as likely to be met by the shambles as herein presented as by the stiff-necked heroes of fiction. On reflection, probably, taking in the imp of perversity, more likely . . .*

THE CAT AND THE COIN

ONE

'PEOPLE are like planets,' concluded the Old Man, 'and only a few of them know which star they turn upon.' He smiled at the assembled audience, sipped a glass of water sparingly while they applauded, touched both hands to his brow and quietly left the Temple.

There was no conversation. People left the gigantic building singly or in pairs and made their way slowly out along the flying walkways that knit the City of Dreamers.

It was a desert city, built among a strange oasis of jagged mountains amid a flat plain of fission-scarred land, the grains of sand melted into fused silicon so that travellers seemed to walk upon a blurred mirror that reflected the deep blue of the sky which was always clear. It never rained in the Blue Desert.

At the main gate spies from everywhere were returning. They came through the silicon columns that dotted the plain outside the city walls and the Emperor's Gate. A bright blue flash among the crystals—then a sudden darkness—a spot of night in the brightness of blazing sunlight, and out of this telescope of darkness would step another figure, hooded in the traditional green robe of the Interstellar Messengers.

Jomo the beggar sat by the Gate and watched them arrive. Year in, year out, Jomo sat and observed and begged alms from each of them. He claimed he knew the disposition of the entire Galaxy from the dispensation of alms from the Messengers as they arrived with secret dispatches from every inhabited planet.

But Jomo was always a liar. That is, he presented a view of the Universe which no one else could share. A vision of his own which fitted every fact he knew but was no more than the sum of them. In short, Jomo was his own star. His universe revolved upon himself and at his death would fall into extinction.

He was near blind, leprous and missing a leg, but his choice of misfortunes had enabled him to achieve something few of his fellow citizens could aspire to. Stability. Jomo was a fixed point. An unwavering perception.

He watched as the nearest of the crystal pillars fused with light and out of the spot of darkness came a tall, green-robed figure who stepped lightly across the glazed silicon land, his shoulders held high, with only a dim far-off sadness in his eyes to denote the misery he had witnessed.

'Dar, Master of the Hopeless Planets,' Jomo greeted him.

The tall being stopped beside the beggar, smiling down.

'If I give you much, you'll think I succeeded; If I give you little you'll know I failed.'

'Here, take this,' said Jomo and gave Dar a small coin from his bowl. 'Take it to the Emperor and tell him I forgave you.'

Dar took the coin and bowed. As he strode away Jomo shouted after him: 'When will you bring us Paradise!' in an angry, bitter voice. But Dar took no notice, knowing it was only for the mob, who drew aside from him as he passed.

'He should give up, that one!' shouted one of the rabble.

'Master Hopeless!' and he spat on the ground at Jomo's feet.

Jomo grabbed his bowl and began scraping the cockle of saliva into it, babbling incoherently as he reverently scummed the spit and sand off his finger and mixed it with the few coins he had managed to acquire since dawn. The crowd were enraged at his mockery.

Someone threw a stone. It caught Jomo high up on the cheek, blotching his eye. The crowd laughed and another glassy stone was flung, and another. Jomo never moved or

made a sound, twitching only when the chunks of rock and silicon thudded wetly against him, knocking his frail body this way and that. With a snarl, an old woman smashed his bowl over his head, screaming insults, and the crowd surged forward, mad for blood. Stomped and scratched, clutched and clawed.

When the fury abated there was little to be seen. A few torn clothes and shreds of flesh. A sticky pool of gore upon the mirror-land for the dogs to lap. It was all over in minutes.

'It was what he wanted!' screamed the old woman, and the crowd drifted away.

Dar watched from the basalt walkway that arched across the city from the Main Gate to the Emperor's Palace. He clutched the tiny silicon coin hard in his hand, feeling the weight of the soul within it.

'Thank you, Jomo,' he whispered. 'I shall have need of your company.'

The Customs check was as rigorous as usual but he palmed the coin and filled their heads with the misery he'd come from and they didn't notice.

Thus it was that Jomo got to see the Emperor of All.

The Emperor's Palace was not large. A simple circular hall burned from the rock, with veins of molten gold and silver running across the ceiling and the walls. The guards were discreet.

The Emperor dismissed his chamberlains with a languid wave.

'I have come,' said Dar.

'You are here,' replied the Emperor formally. 'How is it there? In the Hopeless Worlds?'

Dar stared straight into his Emperor's eyes and the knowledge flowed.

The Emperor sat down. He was very troubled.

'How do you travel?' he asked, his courtesy unfailing.

'As a cat. A large black cat, fast as thought. I flow around corners like black milk.' He laughed and Jomo, in the coin, chuckled with him.

'Ah, Jomo,' said the Emperor. 'At last you've decided to come.'

'Yes,' the coin replied from Dar's extended palm. The Emperor took the coin, smiling at his own image stamped on the silicon face, whose mouth moved when Jomo spoke.

'Karma is swift.'

'Karma is swift,' intoned the Emperor and Dar, touching fingertips from forehead to the coin.

'Dar knows why I have come. One of my planets is near her time. I must be there to assist the birth.'

The Emperor smiled, pleasure and pain equally mixed in his finely sketched features, his cheekbones smooth as beaten gold, his eyes colourless and of infinite depth.

'I always wonder,' he said, 'whenever one of the Hopeless Worlds finds its grain of possibility, what it must be like. They always leave it so late.'

'We must hurry,' Dar blurted. 'There is little time. The continents are about to shift. Cities will be lost, the only developed races are to be plunged into darkness.'

'Very well,' said the Emperor. He handed the coin back to Dar who slipped it carefully into a silk bag he wore at his throat.

The old man shuffled into the room.

'The Karma is swift,' he chanted.

'The Karma is swift,' they responded, bowing.

'Go to the tallest city,' said the Old Man. 'You will find the ones you need with the coin. Whoever refuses it you shall take.'

Dar nodded to the Emperor and the Old Man and left the Palace. When he crossed the outer limits to the silicon column, the dogs had already licked Jomo's blood clean from the glistening ground.

'It was a good spot,' said the coin at his throat; but Dar said nothing. He paused before the crystalline column of silicon and quartz, then dropped his body and spread himself among the molecules and electrons of silicon at the top of the column. And light-years away, Colonel Hubert Lawson said:

'The process is outside our experience. Suffice it to say that the energy obtained by filtering conscious silicon through inanimate quartz is equal to that produced daily by a medium-sized star. As you know, glass is a liquid and flows down through the crystals of quartz without disturbing them. From what we could gather, the Chemistry of Consciousness is quite unexpected. I quote from the hypnosis report: "Human beings are chemical equations no matter how complex, but how long it takes a race to accept the consequences of that and realise the forces at work in their lives are only chemical ... that iron is a state of consciousness as well as a substance. There are Iron people and Oxygen people, Cobalt men and Sulphurous women." According to Oscar, this City of Dreamers is on the planet of the Hydrogen People. The lightest, purest beings in the Universe.'

The Colonel paused, glancing around him at the group of high-ranking military commanders and Defence experts.

'Our technology is still tied to organic matter. Our experiments with living elements have so far been entirely negative.'

'One thing I'd like to ask, Colonel,' growled AeroSpace Marshal Zumgrald. The Colonel came subconsciously to attention.

'How many of these ... er—star beings,' Zumgrald coughed to conceal his irritation. 'How many of these things do you think are getting through?'

'One, sir.'

'ONE!' bellowed Zumgrald in the sudden detonation of rage which had made him feared throughout the service.

'You mean to say, Lawson,' he said, icily through gritted teeth, 'one outer space alley cat is threatening the whole goddamn world?'

'That's exactly what I'm saying, sir,' replied the Colonel, woodenly, knowing the only way to survive a Zumgrald attack was to stick to one's guns no matter what.

'One cat! One goddamn tile rattlin' tomcat and you can't kill it?'

There was a strained silence while the Colonel stared painfully at his tormentor.

'Well, sir. As we have evidence ... that is ... er ... good reason to suppose that this cat—I mean, being ... er, is not a cat but a being. That is ... from Outer Space, sir. I mean, well ... conscious chemistry, sir ... If that's how he got here ...' the Colonel stuttered like a jammed machine-gun. 'At that rate a cat could kill!' he rattled off at last.

'What do you mean?' the Marshal's voice had simmered to a low boiling menace.

'To travel between stars is a technological feat way beyond us, Marshal. Who knows what else these beings can do?'

Marshal Zumgrald sat down, satisfied with what he had learned.

'Thank you, Marshal,' said the President who stood up in his usual tired fashion, the icy glint of power in his eyes. 'Well, Colonel, I see we must believe what you've told us, though it seems kinda crazy to me. You pull a drunk out of the city river and under sedatives he tells you about a cat he met who tried to take him to a star, gave him a glass coin you say. But he didn't want to leave his gutter so he threw the coin away. Am I getting it right, Colonel?'

'Perfectly, sir.'

The President thanked him with a smile.

'So the cat comes back and talks to him, tells him all this stuff about the Hydrogen Men, says if he agrees to visit this City of Dreamers they'll make him world ruler. They show him all these processes and then you find they're all valid?'

'The ones we are in a position to evaluate certainly are, sir, and of Earth-shaking importance. The one involving telekinetic transportation is the most important. We could teleport an army right inside enemy H.Q. in an instant. We could conquer the planet, the Solar System, the stars even. It'd be the biggest breakthrough in the History of Mankind.'

'Quite so,' smiled the President. 'The question is, how soon will you be ready to verify this experiment?'

'Tomorrow, sir.'

'Good man!' roared Marshal Zumgrald. President Carson smiled.

'Very well, Colonel. We shall leave you to get on with the preparations for your display. Who are you using as your guinea pig?'

'I have a volunteer, sir.'

'Good. See he, or his widow, gets ten thousand dollars for his trouble.'

Two

WHEN Betty went on a blinder, she really tied one on. Even the bastards who threw her out had to admit that. Cold water flat, two bottles down, two to go. Two nights drunk, three nights crying and the apartment was a mess. Sticky glasses everywhere, grimy underwear over the chairs, greasy marks on the TV screen, uneaten food on the floor and table.

Betty sat slumped in the overstuffed armchair gazing at the dead set. The tube had burned out hours ago, but she'd only just remembered. 'Open another bottle,' she murmured sluggishly through thickened, difficult lips. 'Damn all men, and damn the govinment. President Joey Carson and his goin' to the stars! I can't even get to the goddamn toilet!'

She heaved her flesh forward, but fell back, her vision glazed by the effort. Her brain felt as if it floated in alcohol, her underwater vision and slurred thoughts the result of her mental drowning. 'Oh, God! There's gotta be a way out!'

At first she didn't notice the black cat sitting placidly erect beside the busted set. But then she heard him purring and the hypnotic buzz sent her sweetly into sleep, the bottle slipping unopened from her sweaty fingers.

She dreamed she'd been given 'Opportunity'! Not this or that. Nothing minor. Just a free pass to her own self esteem. She dreamed of washing up, cleaning house, dumping the empties, stashing the others for a true party—with

friends. She even had a job she respected herself for. Then the dream changed and she sprawled in a dream mirror of her sordid apartment and said to the cat,

'Just look at it, will ya! Biggest slum in this city. I'm a slob!'

And the cat, in the way of dream creatures, said:

'Sure, you're a slob. Tell ya what! Give ya this to quit now.' and he flipped her a glass nickel or some dud coin. Betty bit on it hard, but made no impression so she belched, handed the coin back and laughed.

'First cat I ever see with money. You'd better keep it ... hate folks to say I took pennies from pussies!' and she fell apart laughing, in her dream that is, into pieces and somehow it was the cat's doing. The dream got very weird then and came awful close to being real. Awful goddamn close. There she was, fallen in pieces in her dream, lying in bits all over the scattered chaos of her dream apartment which was identical to her own, and somehow if she opened her eyes in real life she would see exactly what she was dreaming and she knew the dream cat sat beside the set for real, saying,

'Just pull yaself together. Pull hard! Then you can go to bed and sleep it off. It don't matter if it's a dream.'

And she understood him in her dream way, and pulled. And things moved! Jerked about on the floor. So she pulled again. Pulled herself together. Mentally pulled her life-strings taut again and out of the corner of her eye saw the objects begin to move, float back into order. Plates wafted to the sink, washed themselves and were stacked. She saw it plainly as she sat facing the cat, but somehow at the same time dreamed she washed them herself. Clothes were put away, floors polished, cupboards and shelves re-organised. Her whole house shook itself into shape with her thoughts and still she didn't move really, only in her dream working 'til finally it was done. Her apartment immaculate. Sparkling. Her mind made up.

She got up, stroked the cat once, undressed and got into the neatly made bed. She knew she was awake when she

felt herself falling asleep. The cat still purred in her dream and the coin whispered a promise that if she would visit the City of Dreamers they would make her Ruler of the Earth. 'Sure,' Betty mumbled. 'Ruler of the Earth, sure.'

THREE

'IT'S ALL right,' said Oscar to the Colonel, fidgeting with his grey stubbled beard. 'I said as I'd talk an' I will. You gotta gimme a cigarette an' some coffee. Boy, that stuff you give me sure dried me out! WHEEEEE! I mean, but fast!'

'Yes! Yes!' said the Colonel, sharply. 'I've already sent for it. Now I'd just like you to go over the telekinetic method again.'

'WHEEEE. Yessir. Dried me OUT. Telewhat was that? Sure could use a little one. My, my, dry as a bone.' He opened his mouth and his tongue loped out towards the Colonel, bluish-white and furry. 'Lookit that! Drier 'n blue desert! Couldn't catch a drop of moisture.'

The Colonel sighed, poured a stiff measure into a glass and handed it to Oscar.

'That's mighty kind, General. Sure appreciate it. Now about this telemetic. What more can Ah tell ya?'

After an hour it was obvious that Oscar remembered nothing of the experience he had recounted so well during delirium tremens. He elaborated a crude fantasy as long as the Colonel kept his glass filled; but when Lawson refused to give him more, sank into an obscene and florid castigation of the military mind that quite subdued the Colonel until he got angry enough to have Oscar sedated. He had sufficient data to give it a try ... and with Oscar for his guinea pig, there was nothing to lose.

FOUR

BETTY was a beautiful woman when she left her neat apartment the following morning. Her eyes sparkled and her head felt clear. So clear in fact she had no idea where she

was going until she saw a Black Cat go by. She waved and the driver pulled over at once, eyeing her pleasantly.

'Anywhere ya wanna go, baby!'

She smiled for him. Cabbies hadn't been so sweet in years.

'Where were ya when I needed ya?' she said, slipping into the cab. 'Take me out to the President's joint. I'm the cat that's goin' to look at the King.'

The cabbie chuckled, gave her his most dashing smile via the mirror and drove furiously across town, cutting up the traffic, dashing lights with style and abandon and finally slewing into the only free parking space just in front of an official limousine filled with foreign dignitaries. He flashed out of his seat and opened the door for Betty with a chivalrous bow, a stub of well-chewed cigar betraying his sense of mischief.

Betty stepped out, gave the cabbie a solid, hip-grinding kiss, waved to the astonished dignitaries and waltzed in through the main door of the Presidential Palace. It wasn't until the guard and receptionist stepped towards her that she realised she had no idea why she had come. But it made no difference.

She vanished before they could reach her.

Five

'It seems to me,' the President was saying, 'that this could be the biggest thing since industry.'

Niemeyer nodded, smiled tensely to show the Historic strain he was under and said,

'It's a responsibility, sir. A great responsibility.'

'I know, Niemeyer, I know,' said President Carson in his 'sincere' voice. 'But think what we can do! Jump the bastards in their own bathrooms! We can get in and out of there before they know what hit them. Five hundred men could do it, each with a specific target. Materialise ... kill and destroy ... dematerialise. Then we hit 'em in the after-shock with everything we got!'

He smacked his fist against his palm. The First Aide to the President, Adolph Niemeyer's smile was like a thin ribbon of steel drawn across a plaster statue. But he knew his job. To say whatever the President didn't or couldn't say, but say it as if he had. In the present case, the President had chosen to appear optimistic, therefore it was for Niemeyer to sound a note of caution.

'We can only hope, sir. Your administration has already done enough.'

'Sure, sure,' interrupted Carson, glad his Aide was playing the game. 'We've done more than anyone since the war. But this is bigger than anything yet. Once we've ... er ... rationalised the power structure here on earth we can go anywhere! Solar System. Galaxy.'

'Just like the cat, sir.'

'What's that?'

'I said just like ...'

'All right. I heard you. Can't think why they should get so upset about a goddamn cat!'

'But the experiment worked, sir.'

'Sure it worked. I knew it would. Even that drunken slob could do it. Did you see the way they slammed him from one side of the lawn to the other! Poor bastard was white as a sheet!' Carson paused in the memory. 'You saw to it he got the ten thousand?'

'They had to sew it in his pocket. He kept throwing it in the air.'

Carson smiled, a cold zinc crack in his pewter features. 'The point is,' he recollected himself, 'If the experiment works, the cat's for real. And I don't like the idea of two-bit hookers vanishing in the vestibule. You pumped that cabbie?'

'Swears he never saw her before. All she told him was to drive here—said she was the cat that come to look at the King.'

The President stole a quick glance at Niemeyer, but his face was blank. A mask.

'You checked the cab company?' he snapped.

'Black Cat Cabs? Yes. It's nothing. A coincidence. They worked the city for years.'

'Listen, Adolph. When a woman vanishes in thin air and a cat tells a drunk how to cross the stars, I say there are no coincidences. Things are beginning to change around here and I don't know which way they're heading. I want that woman found—and I want her brought here, you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. I'll see the Colonel now. Alone in my study.'

Niemeyer gathered his files and the brief digests he'd brought for Carson's opinions and left the room. Carson smiled again when the Colonel entered, nodded towards his private study and followed him in after checking Interrogation to see if the cabbie had volunteered any more information.

'Sit down, Colonel, sit down,' said Carson affably. 'That sure was a fine display this morning.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'No, no, Hubert, I mean it! You've changed the Face of History.'

Colonel Hubert Lawson could do nothing but blush. For one terrible instant he thought he might break down and cry, but the President twitched with discomfort and the mood passed.

'I'm promoting you to General—Three stars. With pay back-dated to the day you joined the Army.' Carson spoke cordially, smothering Lawson's gratitude as fast as he could. 'That's thirty-six years, eh, Hubert?'

'Nine months, three weeks and two days.'

'Eh? Oh, yes. Well, that's a stack of back pay, boy. And tax free!'

The Colonel was so overcome, Carson had to get up and pour them both a stiff drink before he could continue.

'To business, Colonel. I want that cat!'

'Yessir!' said Hubert Lawson of uncertain rank, downing his drink with a gulp. 'At once.' He paused a moment,

sitting rigidly at attention before his Chief. 'How?' he asked, plaintively.

'That's what I'm asking you. How can we trap this critter. What do you know of its habits?'

'Nothing, sir. There's a million cats down there in the slums. They, er ... feed on the rats,' he proffered gratuitously. It was so difficult being powerful, he thought. A general had to say just the right thing.

Carson looked thoughtful. At last he raised his head.

'General,' he said solemnly. 'I'm making you responsible for capturing every black cat in this city. Use whatever forces you need. Our entire Nation is at your disposal. You have twenty-four hours.'

Hubert reeled. The responsibility! The power! He, Hubie Lawson at the controls of an Empire! He'd have those cats all right. They hadn't a chance. He'd use EVERYTHING.

'Yessir!!' He shouted in a parade-ground voice that startled Carson out of his official cool.

'What the hell? Get out, Lawson! And remember, I want them all assembled for inspection by 18:00 hours tomorrow.'

'Where, sir?' asked Lawson confidently.

'In the basement. You can test them there?'

'Yessir!' bawled Hubie.

'Dismissed.'

General Lawson saluted grandly and left the room. Adolph Niemeyer sidled in at the same time.

'I suppose you've come to tell me the cabbie's dead?'

Niemeyer's mouth dropped open in surprise. The mean bastard was so fast he'd never catch him. 'Yes, sir,' he said.

Six

But the cats were something else. The first step was easy. General Lawson offered a thousand dollars for every black cat in the city and he got a million of them. Dyed, painted

and stained. He set up roadblocks to stop the out of town cat-runners, then organised a reception post in a large basement hallway where he sprayed ten thousand tails with detergent in the first four hours.

Rewards were posted and the slums invaded by burly State Troopers tweeting 'puss, puss', across the housetops, skittering down the fire-escapes and searching the alleys. The cats kept about three garbage cans ahead and by the time it got dark the cats were ahead on points.

The troops used searchlights and flashlights, traps filled with succulent meat. The slum was more savoury than ever before as everyone tried to lure a black cat indoors. Cats were kidnapped, drugged, slugged, snatched from friends and harried wherever they appeared. By morning there wasn't a cat to be seen in the city and General Lawson was already experimenting on his captives held in racks of cages on all sides of the spacious underground laboratory he was using.

Betty watched it all from her window. Two or three times men knocked at her door and asked if she had a black cat anywhere, but she told them 'No' and they left without making any trouble.

At last she turned from the window, crossed her immaculate apartment and sat down. The black cat emerged from the closet where he'd been hiding and came to sit on her lap. Perhaps 'emerged' is the wrong word. The closet door was shut and the cat sort of flowed through it, with no more difficulty than passing through air.

Betty stroked the magnificent creature lovingly, rubbing him under the ears and smoothing his glossy coat over his rippled steel muscles.

'You're safe with me, kid,' she said and the cat turned to stare hard and direct into her eyes. Next thing she knew, Betty was back in the vestibule of the President's Palace. So fast she almost forgot she'd ever been away and certainly couldn't remember how she came. But the black cat was with her this time and neither the guard nor the recep-

tionist made the slightest move towards her. Their jaws dropped open like they chewed lead gum.

'Tell King Carson the cat an' me wants to see him,' she said, feeling marvellous. It was amazing how her self-confidence had come back. Betty had no idea or notion why she'd come, but everything she said or did made her feel just great, so she kept on trucking, neither caring nor thinking how things would turn out.

After a whispered telephone call the vestibule was suddenly filled with discreet, muscular men in business suits. They stayed in the corners and made no move towards Betty or the cat.

'Hi, fellas! Come to show us the way?'

A tall Secret Service man nodded and opened a large door. Betty and the cat passed through and followed him down a series of elegant corridors, through several antechambers filled with startled secretaries and worried officials. The cat walked in front of Betty, trotting to keep pace with the Secret Service man, his tail swishing back and forth, back and forth. About a dozen other Secret Service men followed them, crashing through offices, stumbling into each other in their eagerness to be of use.

At last the guard paused before an ornate brass door. He knocked three times, then stepped aside. Before the door could open, the cat loped nonchalantly through it. To her amazement, Betty found herself following him through the wood and brass into the inner sanctum of President Joseph Carson.

'O.K. O.K. Don't lose ya marbles, Carson. At least we knocked.' Betty greeted him. 'Where ya keep the booze?'

Carson recovered magnificently. He poured himself a tumblerful of raw scotch and offered Betty the bottle. She took it and drank it dry in a single swallow. Carson gaped.

'Sheee!' she said, wiping her lips with the back of her hand. 'I ain't had a drink since yesterday. Mind if I give some to the cat?'

Carson downed his own drink and opened another bottle, eyeing the cat warily.

'This the cat from space?' he asked, pouring whisky into his ashtray and giving it to the cat.

'The very same.'

'What's his price?'

'I ain't got one!' said the cat, who had unfortunately learned the native dialect from Betty. President Carson stared at the whisky-guzzling cat in amazement.

'He talks?'

'Sure,' said Betty. 'An' he's got a talking glass nickel too.'

The President poured himself another drink. Jomo, in the coin said hello and introduced himself to the President who was about to reply when Oscar, the drunk, blatted into the room. One minute he wasn't, the next he was. Blam. Just like that. The President blinked. A very pasty-faced Oscar blinked back, and eyed the bottle of whisky longingly. Dumbfounded, the President offered him the bottle; but no sooner had Oscar clutched it in his shaking hand when—Blam. He vanished again. For a series of startling instants he blatted into existence in four or five odd parts of the room, each time swilling greedily from the bottle which flickered faithfully in and out of existence with him. At last he vanished and Carson turned to Betty for an explanation.

'He's drunk,' she slurred and the President only nodded, hastily opening another bottle and tilting it eagerly.

Out of the corner of the room he saw the black cat slip out through the open window.

'Stop!' screamed Carson, slamming the bottle down.

'Stop what?' asked Oscar blandly materialising, his face flushed and the light of mischief in his eye as he solemnly handed the empty bottle to the President and hastily snatched the full one, unsure how long he might continue to exist.

'Stop the cat!' shrieked the President, and Oscar cracked up.

'WHEEEE. Yessir. Oh, my goddamn. Them cats! teehee, yes, yes, yes. I near forgot.' But before he could elucidate further he dissolved.

'The cat's still here,' said Betty pointing to Dar who was still lapping whisky. Carson silently opened another bottle and took a long pull before passing it over to Betty.

'Oh, well,' he said, and belched. 'Pardon. I just thought I see a black cat go out over there.' And as he pointed, not one but three black cats hopped in. They seemed like black cats; but a double blink showed they had white and orange tails and their fur was blotched with dye.

The President belched, shrugged, drank, swallowed and belched again.

'Cats,' he remarked succinctly. 'They probably escaped from the basement. Now what does this cat want?'

'I am Dar, Master of the Hopeless Worlds,' the cat enunciated carefully. 'Jomo and I have come to assist you in your next evolution.' And he flipped the glass coin from his paw on to the table. Carson picked it up gingerly.

'Don't take any bad nickels,' Oscar advised, blatting in and out of the room just long enough to exchange whisky bottles.

'What's it worth?' mumbled the President, opening another and feeling real good. Intergalactic diplomacy seemed real easy. For answer the coin became a hole in space in his hand and weird music floated out of it. Carson closed his eyes and dreamed of blue deserts and strange beings. The music made him want to dance. He smiled gallantly at Betty, momentarily forgetting the coin.

'You got a good figure there. How old are ya?'

'Thirty-nine is what I'm admitting. How about another drink? Over on the sofa.'

Carson forgot about dancing.

'What about our assistance for your evolution?' said Dar, dripping whisky on to the coin so that Jomo might experience this strange brew.

'Get lost!' said Betty, snatching a quick drink with one hand while she flung the other round Carson's neck.

'Sure damn fine whisky,' mumbled the President, struggling out of his suspenders.

'Thanks for the drinks, Mr. President!' whooped Oscar, temporarily stabilised by the liquor cabinet. Carson and Betty took no notice from their flurry of garters, corsets and Presidential monogrammed linen on the sofa.

The door flew open and General Lawson darted in and grabbed Oscar. Six or seven cats followed him in.

'Hi, Sarge, have a drink!' Oscar bellowed, but Hubert Lawson would have none of it. He was a disgrace. He'd failed his country. First the damn cats had broken out, then Oscar started teleporting himself all over the Palace getting drunk, and it hadn't been such a smart idea to sew bottle tops on his uniform. Should've waited for his General's stars to come through. He didn't mean to show himself of course; but he'd had to, now ...

Hubert Lawson stopped stock still. Frozen in unbelieving horror. His President was threshing on the sofa with a rather fat, middle-aged woman and there were bottles of whisky everywhere. Hubert was scandalised. Couldn't speak. The door whammed open and Adolph Niemeyer burst in, followed by a horde of cats yelling for revenge. He too, stopped dead. Oscar, his arms and pockets filled with bottles, vanished into drunken air. The black cat on the table shouted,

'Doesn't anybody want salvation?' Whereupon, all the cats in the room descended on their unnatural cousin and a mauling, spewing, screaming catfight erupted—boiling across the heaving Betty and President Carson thrusting for dear life. Hubert stammered and Niemeyer groaned.

'Get these damn cats outta here!' screamed the glass nickel, but no one took any notice as Oscar blatted through one more time, guzzling merrily.

Hubert stammered again, unable to take his eyes off his Leader. At last he pulled himself together, saluted and said, 'I didn't mean to interrupt your interrogation, sir.'

DAR, the cat, dematerialised. He mutated through the quartz and silicon pillar and made his way through the Main Gate, over the flying walkway to the Palace of the Emperor of All.

'What can we do?' groaned the Old Man, polishing Jomo's coin 'til it winked in the sun.

'Nothing ever works in the Hopeless Worlds.'

THE DEBRIS OF RECENT LIVES

by

CHARLES PARTINGTON

After 'Sporting on Apteryx' published in Volume 23, Charles Partington narrowly escaped a nasty mischief when drying himself on a hand towel. Readers of New Writings *are no less fortunate in the happy outcome of that perilous encounter for they are now able to venture into further crannies of creation within Charles Partington's brain where Storrs and lella eternally fail to meet among the constellations of the mind.*

THE DEBRIS OF RECENT LIVES

'I prize seeing a great deal. In the visual image we possess life itself.'
—Goethe.

LATER, STORRS had stood before the viewscreen, staring mindlessly at the exploding star.

'Where now?' Van Vliet had asked. 'Earth?'

Storrs had shaken his head. 'No. Anywhere but there.' The expression on his face had been one of utter desolation.

'Anywhere?' Van Vliet had echoed.

Storrs had just nodded numbly.

All his free time was now spent in the darkening well of the viewroom. Each visit he occupied a different chair. Upon leaving he had scored a name, always the same one, into the back of the chair in front of where he had been sitting.

Storrs had never questioned Van Vliet about their destination. Such considerations no longer interested him. The only indications he had were the increasing areas of blackness on the viewscreen.

Time passed. Storrs continued to make his almost ritualistic visits to the viewroom. And each visit saw the name added to another chair.

The first knowledge Storrs had of the arrival of a second passenger on board the Glider came after another period of sleep tormented with dreams of Iella.

He had awoken sweating and exhausted, suddenly aware that something had happened to the ship while he slept. The intensity of his dreams, the surging despair those images of Iella had evoked, prevented Storrs from realising immediately what it was that seemed different about the Glider. He dressed and went in search of the Captain.

When Storrs located Van Vliet, he found him manipulating servo-mechanisms to place a number of crude organics into an empty hold. The material had a texture and cellular structure similar to wood, but wood grown on oddly warped trees.

Storrs watched, vaguely perturbed, realising that if the Glider was taking on cargo it must be operating at a sub-light velocity, possibly in orbit around a planetary body. He had slept through the transition which apparently had induced those traumatic recollections of Iella.

He watched the operation in silence. His interest in anything was minimal these days. The initial shock of Cin 2347's premature nova was still with him, perhaps it always would be.

Iella had died before he had been able to reach her. His decision not to send word of his departure for Cin 2347 but to surprise her was also a cause for regret.

The delay had been of his own making. There had been more than sufficient time to make the journey. Yet he had postponed the decision time and again, hoping illogically that Iella would change her mind, even though he was aware of the depth of her feelings concerning Cin 2347.

When too little time remained Storrs had accepted the inevitable and booked passage on the Glider. Iella had died among strangers without realising that he was on his way to join her, and Storrs knew now that he would never be able to erase his guilt complex.

Noticing him, Van Vliet nodded a terse greeting, his hands hovering briefly above the servo-mechanism controls. 'Quar.' he explained. 'You may have heard of it.'

Storrs shook his head.

'No? It's considered an excellent substance by the Ceol. Under their hands it manifests properties unattainable by other lifeforms. But then I'm sure your fellow passenger could explain far better than I.'

The possibility of Van Vliet accepting another passenger on-board the Glider had never occurred to Storrs. Physical journeys were rarely undertaken, most lifeforms preferring to visit by proxy, exchanging personalities for prearranged periods, the delay between transmission and reception of the psyche being passed in cryosleep, a small inconvenience for the prospect of another world, the possession and sensations of another body.

During the flight, especially since the nova of Cin 2347, Storrs had evolved an understanding with Van Vliet. Conversation was restricted to necessities, each pursuing his own interests without inflicting himself on the other. The prospect of this Ceol filled Storrs with alarm. There was a blackness inside him that shunned intimacies.

Van Vliet indicated a figure approaching along the corridor. 'Why not introduce yourself? You should both have much to discuss. I understand that ...' The Captain smiled apologetically. 'I'm afraid his name will not suffer a translation. That Ceol is considered a great artist by his own people.' Deliberately then, Van Vliet turned back to his servo-mechanisms.

The number of star systems containing life within the galaxy had been estimated as being in excess of one hundred and sixty thousand, a high percentage of which had produced their own unique intelligence structures. Homo sapiens had found it relatively easy to accept the more bizarre lifeforms, Earth's own riotous genetic display having long accustomed them to the acceptance of infinite variety. Conversely, only when intelligence approached the human form did the ancient subconscious fears surface.

The Ceol was a near copy of Homo sapiens, the minor differences assuming frightening proportions which in

Storrs' weakened and vulnerable state threatened to swamp his reasoning in a wave of emotive fear.

It was then, as the alien approached along the narrow corridor, that their eyes met. Storrs stared only briefly into those fluid expressionless orbs, but the undeniable sensation that it was reaching down into his soul and fastening upon what it found there, sent Storrs gasping for the privacy of his cabin, his ritual in the viewroom forgotten in his panic to avoid this alarming invasion of his innermost processes.

Hours later he condemned but could not overcome the irrational fear which kept him a prisoner in his cabin for the rest of that period.

Storrs was never to lose his dread of Ceol. If anything his revulsion increased each time he came into contact with his fellow passenger.

On one occasion Storrs had been seated as usual in the viewroom, his eyes on the growing darkness he had come to realise was the edge of the galaxy, his thoughts and memories on Iella and her burning ambitions. Storrs' own talent had never equalled hers, his mind faltering before the vision of her accomplishments. Yet she had never been satisfied.

For decades, art in all its aspects had hesitated, seemingly unsure, directionless, lacking the intellectual leaders who might have indicated the way. A condition of stasis had existed for too long. Originality was dead, buried under the outpourings of countless previous generations, a culmination of the vast legacy produced over a span of thirty-thousand years. The impact of new cultures had compounded the condition rather than stimulating it. Human artists had retreated perplexed before the incoming tidal wave of alien concepts, seeking refuge in a return to classical themes. Iella and others like her recognised the problem but so far had been unable to produce a solution. Storrs had offered what encouragement he could; but more than encouragement had been needed.

Storrs stretched in his chair, surfacing briefly from his recollections.

The viewscreen had been suddenly filled with glowing filaments of gas, nebulous spirals of interstellar material looping and whirling in response to unseen forces. Their effect upon Storrs had been hypnotic. Again he plunged into reminiscences.

Concerned with this cultural confusion, they had naturally been aware of the peremptory exodus of Earth's prominent literary and artistic figures, and of the rumours concerning Cin 2347, for weeks before the pebbles arrived.

Inquiries about these inexplicable departures proved negative. Iella's questions received only cautionary glances or amused smiles within those elitist circles she had been able to penetrate on the strength of her growing reputation in art. The news media were preoccupied with the current political upheavals. Official sources refused to comment. However, they did not have long to wait for the answer.

The pebbles arrived accompanied by a terse handwritten note. The signature was unmistakable and one Iella found extremely flattering. 'Join us—please,' the note read, 'the pebbles will tell you all you need to know.' Attached to the note were two one way tickets to Cin 2347's only planet.

Looking up from the tickets, Storrs saw tears in Iella's eyes. She was clenching her pebble very tightly between both hands. She looked as though she would never let go of it again.

Thoughtfully, Storrs had brushed his fingers over his own pebble. He had experienced nothing. The pebble was dead. Or he was.

Iella had her pebble split into pieces, each fragment mounted into a separate silver ring. She wore the rings constantly, and her work had improved, gaining a strength and conviction previously only hinted at. She was obviously inspired. And Storrs came to realise that it really didn't matter what had brought about this change in her work,

the pebble shards or some subtle psychosomatic process. The results were what mattered. And they were startling.

Once, Storrs had searched for his own pebble, intending to subject it to a thorough analysis. Though he spent hours looking, he never found it. Perhaps that had been psychosomatic, too.

It ended as they both realised it must during a period of increasing anxiety on Iella's part. She had become inconsolably restless and ill-at-ease, even though her work had been going well. The answer had been obvious to them both.

'I have to go.' She had told him simply. 'You do understand, don't you? I have to go.' They had both accepted that she would be making the trip alone. The fact that Cin 2347 was classified unstable was never mentioned.

These memories and others came flooding over Storrs with a vividness that left him aching with longing and despair. As the last traces of gas fled from the viewscreen Storrs turned away, his mind swimming with visual echoes. Standing in the half-open doorway at the back of the viewroom stood Ceol. He had obviously been standing there for some time. He left before Storrs reached the door.

On his next visit to the viewroom, Storrs was appalled to discover that someone had been in during his absence. Whoever it was had been persistent. Iella's name had been scored into the rest of the chairs.

Before leaving for Cin 2347, Iella had presented Storrs with a self-portrait as a parting gift. She had painted it in secret and she insisted that Storrs was not to remove the wrapping until after her departure. It was undoubtedly the best piece she had ever painted, possibly a masterpiece. Every time he looked at it he experienced despair and pride in equal measure, a mingling of emotions. It was the final proof that her decision had been the right one. Now it hung on his cabin wall in the Glider.

After the latest incident in the viewroom, Storrs had a

series of strangely vivid dreams, each revolving around a specific facet of his relationship with Iella, each conjuring her presence more powerfully than the last. In those dreams Storrs relived the anguish and the exhilaration of their relationship; recollections of events he had struggled desperately to forget flashing past with the clarity of yesterday's memories.

He woke once in the darkness of his cabin. He was covered in sweat and had obviously been crying out. His face was wet with tears. He sobbed in the darkness remembering Iella. As sleep dragged him back into his dreams he sensed that he was not alone in the room.

When he next awoke he was shivering violently. He snapped the light on, staring feverishly around the cabin. He was alone. When his eyes rested on Iella's self-portrait he cried out in anguish. The symmetry of her features had been tortured into a distorted agony, the colours running and merging under the pressure of ill-shaped fingers.

Storrs felt a blind rage sweep over him at this violation of Iella's portrait. It was senseless, alien. He cursed Ceol's incomprehensible interference with his privacy. The situation, always uneasy, had now become intolerable.

Bursting from his cabin, Storrs found Ceol crumpled into a motionless heap in the corridor. His skin had taken on a disturbing grey pallor. The only colour on his body was smeared on the tips of his fingers.

After Storrs delivered news of the alien's collapse, Van Vliet applied medical aid to the unconscious form. Though Ceol's body was humanoid, Storrs realised that there were vast biological differences between the alien and an Earth man. Yet Van Vliet seemed to know exactly what to do, administering drugs and checking the level of organic activity with a sureness and dexterity that indicated long practice. Storrs began to wonder where Van Vliet had accumulated such unlikely knowledge.

There was an awkward moment when Van Vliet, satis-

fied he could do no more until Ceol was transferred to the medical centre, asked for Storrs' help to carry him there.

Storrs shook his head, stepping back a pace. There was no way he could explain. He just couldn't bring himself to touch Ceol's body. The thought was abhorrent to him. He remembered Iella's ruined face in the painting; Ceol's recurring intrusions on his eremetic existence; the growing suspicion that the alien's presence aboard the Glider was other than just coincidental. Even in Van Vliet's behaviour Storrs had begun to detect an ambiguity of purpose. 'Ceol has to go,' Storrs said defensively. 'He has to leave this ship. I can stand no more of his interference.'

Van Vliet stared at him, then lifted the alien in his arms, his face flushed with effort and anger. 'Go where?' he asked. 'Don't you understand? Ceol is dying.'

It was some days before he saw either of them again. Storrs had resumed his routine of sitting in the viewroom during his waking hours, eating and sleeping in his cabin, attempting to come to terms with his apparently futile existence.

When Storrs learned from Van Vliet that Ceol, after making a partial recovery, had locked himself in the hold containing the Quar by destroying the opening mechanism, his initial reaction was relief. He had feared further impositions; at least his solitude was assured.

However, Van Vliet's expression suggested that his relief was premature.

'What exactly is Ceol doing in the hold?'

Van Vliet was evasive. 'I suggest you determine that for yourself.'

On the instrument deck, the nerve centre of the ship, Storrs watched one screen of the visual monitoring system. The wide angle lens of the closed-circuit camera mounted in the hold's ceiling gave the scene a distorted surrealistic atmosphere, increasing Storrs' unease. Ceol was working

with strange cutting tools on the Quar. It was obvious even then that the subject he had chosen was Iella.

'Why?' Storrs asked, turning bewildered from the screen. 'Why me—why Iella?'

'Don't you really understand, after all this time?' Van Vliet sighed. 'Iella would. Empathy and feeling. Inspiration, Storrs; inspiration!'

Storrs looked at what Ceol was doing. 'You condone that?'

'I am unable to judge. I am merely the instrument.'

'And I the victim.'

'A question of interpretation.'

From that moment Storrs' visits to the viewroom were abandoned. He spent as much time as possible watching Ceol on the monitoring screen, refusing to leave the set even for his meals, dragging himself away only when his inflamed eyes and tortured mind induced fantasies and aberrations.

Ceol seemed a shadow, ghastly thin, driving himself with inhuman energy, denying the weakness of his failing body as his hands moved and shaped and reformed the Quar.

Occasionally Van Vliet would come and stare at the screen, a look of tired hopelessness on his face. His concern was obvious and Van Vliet offered no explanation, made no attempt to disguise his involvement. Storrs frequently found himself deliberating about their relationship.

At first merely apprehensive about the statue of Iella Ceol was fashioning, Storrs progressed by rapid stages to unconcealed distress. This was Iella as seen through alien eyes, through alien senses. At first glance the differences seemed slight, intangible almost, as though Ceol was reinterpreting her personality rather than her physical appearance. Yet Storrs sensed a deeper allusion. Ceol was making a statement; but unable to translate the form of that statement, Storrs experienced an impotent confusion.

Though he possessed the machinery to force an entry into the hold, Van Vliet, afraid of the possible harmful con-

sequences to Ceol in such a confined area, refused. Storrs was growing desperate, the strain he was undergoing assuming all the symptoms of a potential nervous breakdown.

Seeking some way at least to delay the completion of the statue of Iella, Storrs managed to convince Van Vliet that it would be in Ceol's interests if the lights in the hold were to be extinguished. Van Vliet agreed, realising that if Ceol continued working at the same compulsive intensity he would be dead within a matter of hours, that unable to see he would be forced to rest. It was a decision that suited both of them. It allowed them an extension of the inevitable, an opportunity to think.

Even then Storrs found it impossible to leave the blacked-out screen. He sat in front of the set, completely immobile for long periods, more on edge than when he had been able to watch Ceol working.

He waited for a day and a night, not knowing what was happening, until the tension reached an unendurable level. When Van Vliet had turned the lights off in the hold, Storrs had made a note of the position of the switch on the complicated instrument display. Unable to bear the uncertainty any longer, Storrs switched the lights back on.

His unvoiced suspicions assumed reality. Ceol had finished the statue. The alien had worked on in the darkness and now his work was complete.

It was many minutes before Storrs realised that Ceol had not moved. Even in death the alien retained the ability to frighten him.

And the copy of Iella inspired fear, a subtle uncertain scratching of nerve ends, a series of fluid visual distortions always too transient to identify, never so fleeting they could be ignored. Now more acutely aware than ever of the contradictions and discords Ceol had worked into his interpretation of Iella, Storrs groped blindly for an understanding of the origin of these unnerving declensions.

He looked down at his hands then. In the uncontrollable

twitchings of his fingers lay the only possible route to that answer.

Van Vliet called him a madman but did not refuse his request. 'There are hazards you know nothing of in handling Quar,' he explained.

'I must correct the errors,' Storrs insisted. 'I must!' The desperation in his voice could not be denied.

Van Vliet nodded. 'Very well. There are precautions. I will instruct you as best I can.' He recognised the impossibility of attempting to change Storrs' mind, that there were dangers for Storrs no matter which course he took. At least let the decision be of his own making.

The first time Storrs touched the Quar his stomach heaved. It was warm, with the feel of flesh. So real was the illusion that momentarily he could almost believe that it was Iella who stood before him. But the differences remained, grew more apparent the longer he looked. The dream shattered.

Van Vliet had instructed him on the malleability period of Quar. Hours remained, perhaps a day at the longest, before it became impossible to work the material. But old fears were not lightly overcome, the heritage of superstition still paced uneasily in the subconscious.

Oddly, once started he did not doubt his ability to resurrect the real Iella from beneath the alien mask. Ceol had been a great artist. But *he* had been Iella's lover, her soulmate. He knew her.

But he did not know Quar. And he did not know himself. He began to learn in the hours that followed.

Quar; of vegetable origin, Van Vliet had said. It moved under his hands, twitching slightly, shivering, as though rejecting the knife. And as Storrs worked the Quar fastened to his hands, attached itself to his fingers, interfered with his control and his grip on the oddly shaped knife.

Time after time he was forced to stop to cut the Quar

away, experiencing revulsion, even pain if he left the shearing away long enough. The pain was real. The Quar was growing into his skin. Blood flowed when he cut it away. If Quar had a vegetable origin it also had an affinity for flesh.

With the pain came delusions, products of a mind too long under stress; images from the id conjured by his ordeal and the evocative stimulant of the duplicate Iella. His senses fragmented. Chaos filled his mind. Added to an increasing temporal discontinuity, came a heightened symphysis of tactile and visual perceptions in a tumult of unintelligible impulses. Intellect and the critical eye surrendered to instinct and subconscious desires. The agony of his hands faded to insignificance before the assault on his mind.

When he could do no more, when violent spasms shook his body and his willpower fled, Storrs staggered blindly out of the hold screaming obscenities along the corridors of the Glider. Obeying some irrational urge he dragged his body towards the viewroom. There, before collapsing into unconsciousness, he saw on the viewscreen that the Glider was approaching an asteroid.

The asteroid was remarkable only in that it was large enough to retain a tenuous atmosphere. Its surface was harsh, pitted with faults and crevasses and grey with long dead laval plains; with here and there indications of lichens and mosses. An uninspiring destination.

Waiting for Van Vliet, Storrs used the visual monitoring equipment to look into the hold. He stared in silence for a moment then switched it off.

The duplicate Iella was exactly as it had been before Storrs had attempted the metamorphosis. Though able to correct certain physical inaccuracies, the prime illusive imperfections remained.

A sudden suspicion, a moment of freezing doubt, entered his mind. Was Ceol's interpretation closer to the real Iella? Was Ceol, an alien, capable of a more accurate assessment

of her character than he? For Storrs, the implications were appalling.

'Why are we landing?' he said when Van Vliet entered the instrument deck.

'Because Ceol requested it.'

'Ceol is dead.'

'Am I then to ignore his wishes?'

Storrs shook his head, confused. Then: 'Why did he choose this place?'

'His motives do not concern me. He had his reasons.'

'Reasons?' Storrs challenged. 'What did you know of his reasons? How could you? Ceol was an alien!'

'Alien?' Van Vliet mused, studying the landscape whirling past below them. The bleakness in the rocks was reflected and intensified by the expression on his face.

Storrs stood gasping in the thin acidic air, wondering what madness had prompted him to leave the ship. It was bitterly cold and except for a narrow band of glittering light which marked the edge of the galaxy, the sky was black. There were shadows and deeper shadows, and soul destroying silence.

Van Vliet appeared in the airlock after a time. He was carrying something. Even at that distance Storrs knew immediately what it was.

He watched as Van Vliet moved across the inclined plain away from the ship.

Iella! He had to fight down the insane conviction that it was she Van Vliet carried in his arms. The suggestion was almost too strong for him to ignore.

The cold and the bitter atmosphere, an eventually deadly combination of gasses, were draining his strength. Already sluggish motor responses were warning him of the danger of remaining much longer. He had been out on the surface over an hour now. Yet he refused to heed the warnings. The enigma of the duplicate Iella replaced all other considerations.

He looked down for a moment, resting his eyes. In the dust at his feet and embedded in the rocks were the fragments and remains of earlier life.

Van Vliet set the statue down, then began to walk back across the plain towards the Glider. If he noticed Storrs he made no sign.

Relative to the galaxy the asteroid was spinning slowly, revolving along its own axis. Low down on its horizon a star appeared, glimmering and pulsing with unnatural rhythms, oscillating slowly from dim red to brilliant blues.

Without being told, Storrs knew the name of that Star; Cin 2347. It was the most beautiful and the most terrible star he had ever seen.

Now he realised Van Vliet's reason for pushing the Glider towards the galaxy's edge. They had overtaken the light explosion from Cin 2347's nova. The destruction of that star still lay in the future here.

But what was the purpose of it all? What was this dreadful myopia that affected his understanding?

Tension grew within him. The tension, the waiting and the unending silence were slowly crushing him.

The rime forming on his lips tasted like salt-blood. All the confusion and torment he had experienced since Iella's death mounted within him. Storrs was human and fallible; and desperately afraid. The pressures inside him were unbearable.

Unable to face the answer which waited for him, Storrs ran sobbing from the shadows towards Van Vliet and the Glider.

'Van Vliet!' he screamed. 'I'm coming too. Wait for me!'

The last sounds were the roars and reverberations of the Glider's impulse jets as she lifted off.

Later the laval plain was illuminated by a brilliant radiance erupting from low down on the asteroid's horizon. In the glare of that dying sun could be seen the tears in Iella's eyes.

TALENT SPOTTER

by

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

The Laws of conservation of energy, no less than those demanding equal and opposite reactions, apply to our universe whether we will it or no. In sharp defiance of these rules, often in attempts to outflank them, cults have grown up founded on beliefs that, in essence, are demands for something for nothing. In this world—as in others as Sydney Bounds here points out—that demand is the wishful thinking.

TALENT SPOTTER

RAGNAROK came to town in a cloud of dust. Yellow dust that sprayed outwards and upwards in twin arcs from the jets of his hovervan. The town was a small one on the edge of the desert; houses and shops and inns snug round a market square.

He headed straight for the square and settled his van to the ground in empty cattle pens, switched off the engine and threw back the hatch. Idlers watched him climb out, tall and greybearded, wrapped in a cloak starred with astrological symbols. He adjusted a conical hat on his head and methodically began moving the fences back to gain more space.

A stout man carrying a tankard crossed to him. 'What d'you think you're up to?'

Ragnarok removed his hat in a sweeping bow. 'Temporary. Purely temporary. All will be set right again. An evening performance only.' Deftly he strung a banner across the square from roof to roof. It showed, in ornate lettering:

THE GREAT RAGNAROK—MAGIC SHOW

As the sun sank redly over the desert, warm light spilled from tavern windows and a crowd gathered about the cattle pens in the square. There were youngsters, of course; the show always drew them. Ragnarok's gaze raked the crowd again, spotting trouble. It was there, in the shadows at the back, waiting; a hard knot of jato boys, reefing it up.

He slid an arm inside the hovervan and started a tape. The music began quietly. He raised both hands and sparks

trailed green and red and violet from hand to hand as he intoned:

'The Great Ragnarok thanks you for your attention. There is nothing to fear, this magic is for entertainment only. Step closer and watch the magic that deceives the eye.'

He brought a clutch of coloured globes from beneath his cloak, expertly juggled them. Then he withdrew his hands. The globes danced on their own, up and down, round and round in a continuing loop, faster and faster. They slowed to the beat of music and he caught them one by one and stowed them away.

'Looks easy, doesn't it?' he asked in a confidential tone. 'Magic always looks easy—something for nothing. Now, may I have a volunteer? Just one, anyone will do.'

He looked into the crowd, closer now, noticed the jato boys edging forward. Not long now.

A girl moved out of the crowd, half-pushed, giggling. Male cheers informed she was well-known and so not likely to be accused of being his accomplice.

Ragnarok bowed, appreciating the low cut of her blouse. 'Thank you, my dear. It helps if you relax.' He made vague passes with his hands, chanting monotonously. 'Relax ... stay relaxed now ...'

Gradually, the girl's feet left the ground. She drifted upward. A gasp sighed from the crowd and they pressed closer to see better. She floated higher as the music tinkled, her flared skirt billowing, the men looking up the full reach of her legs.

'Enough,' Ragnarok said, and clapped his hands. Gently, the girl settled to the ground.

The jato boys pushed forward, elbowing the crowd aside, menacing in glossy black uniforms.

'You can't make a show of our Queenie,' their youthful leader said, and unsheathed a knife from his belt. 'Let's see how good your magic really is—let's see it stop us cutting you.'

Ragnarok stood alone as the crowd moved back. His calm

voice lifted. 'Don't leave, friends. This interruption will be dealt with promptly.'

He stared intently at the jato leader, pointed a finger in a dramatic gesture.

The leader wriggled uncomfortably, went red in the face and loosened his collar. He dropped his knife as though it had become red-hot. His uniform began to smoulder and he tore off his clothes as they burst into flames. Naked, he fled as the crowd laughed.

The rest of the jato boys paused, looking uncertainly at Ragnarok. Then they too turned and ran as a wave of heat engulfed them.

'It's simple when you know how,' Ragnarok said, winking. 'And I know how.' He floated above the ground. 'Watch closely, folks.'

To the fascinated audience it seemed that he vanished in mid-air.

'Here!'

Heads turned. Ragnarok floated above and behind them, vanished again. Heads swivelled this way and that, looking for him. Ragnarok appeared briefly over his hovervan; disappeared, revealed himself perched on a sloping roof, smiling down.

Then he was back in the pens, standing, bowing. 'That's all. Show's over and I hope you enjoyed the fun.'

As the crowd began to disperse, he was among them, inverted cap held out. Coins clinked. Ragnarok thought: better than usual, much better for having taking the jato boys down a peg. That was often appreciated.

He tipped the coins into a pouch, removed his banner and began putting the fences back in place, not hurrying.

Two boys, each about fourteen, waited by his van, eyeing each other and him. One was spindle-thin and sharp-featured; the other thickset and dull of face. Both wore work clothes that marked them off as coming from the poorer section of the community.

'Well, boys, what can I do for you?'

They hesitated, and Moonface spoke first, slowly: 'I was wondering if you ever take——'

'An apprentice,' the other finished quickly.

'It has been know.' Ragnarok looked at Moonface. 'Your name?'

'Bruno.'

'And what will your parents say, Bruno?'

A baffled expression struggled across the dull face. 'I dunno.'

Ragnarok stroked his beard idly. Slow thinking; likely the parents would be the same. 'Any brother or sisters?'

'Five.'

So Bruno wouldn't be missed overmuch; one less mouth to feed. 'All right, Bruno, I'll consider your application.' Ragnarok turned to Spindle-shanks. 'And your name?'

'Call me Spider.' The voice was shrill and confident. 'I left home to set up on my own—they don't want me back.'

'I see.' And Ragnarok had seen; a thin fist, lightning swift, dipping pockets in the crowd while he entertained.

'Let me explain something first. Magic, most people think, is getting something for nothing. A wave of the hand and what you wish for appears—without any hard work to get it. If only it were like that!' Ragnarok sighed wryly. 'It isn't, of course. You have to learn to make magic and that is work, a long and weary business it is, too, with little enough reward along the way. A talent has to be developed and that can take years. Years, I say! Well?'

Both faces glowed with eagerness. 'Yes, sir, I—we—want to learn magic.'

'All right then.' Ragnarok's voice was suddenly abrupt. 'You'll come with me.'

He removed his hat and stowed it away, climbed into the hovervan. The boys crowded in behind.

'Hang on.'

Ragnarok started the engine, lifted and headed out of town across the desert. He navigated by moonlight, keeping away from the caravan routes and camping sites. Bruno stared fascinated at the plumes of sand thrown up on each

side. Spider—obviously—had travelled by air cushion before.

Ragnarok stopped in an isolated gully between rocky crags. 'You'll sleep inside tonight. There's food and milk on these shelves. Don't touch anything else.'

He stepped outside, and vanished.

Ragnarok sighed contentedly as he settled back on a foam couch in Sanctuary. He sipped a white wine while he waited for the autochef to grill his steak and mushrooms. Here, he was beyond danger and could let his guard down, relax completely. Even with his proven abilities he felt vulnerable sometimes. A sign of age? And it didn't help to be alone so much.

He ate leisurely, finished his wine, and turned the pages of a book till he felt sleep steal over him.

Sanctuary, computer-controlled, continued silently in orbit.

He rapped on the side of the hovervan. 'Come on out. The sun's up and there's work to do.'

Bruno climbed out, rubbing sleepy eyes. Spider eyed Ragnarok warily. Been through every little thing, he thought; wonder what's missing this time?

The boys washed and ate breakfast.

'First, mental exercises. Remember, magic is all in your mind. I have to wake an unused part of your brain, then you can begin to do what I can do. After that, it's just practice, years and years of practice. These exercises are designed to wake the sleeping talent inside you.'

'Now make your mind blank. If it helps, think of a night sky, a sky without a moon or stars, a darkness without even a pinpoint of light, smooth as velvet . . .'

Two young faces contorted in agony.

'Relax! Relax and try again. Stay relaxed.'

Ragnarok kept them at it, watching closely. There was no telling how long it might take. Some made a quick breakthrough; others never achieved anything.

Spider, he acknowledged, had a razor-sharp mind, and was good with his hands—possibly too bright for his own good. It seemed unlikely that Bruno would ever be more than a plodder, slow and steady. But where the talent was concerned, anything could happen.

After a break at mid-day——

'You must keep trying. It'll come. All you need is perseverance. We'll try something different this time. I want you to think of a switch, a simple on-off switch. The switch is in your head and it's in the "off" position. When you move the switch to "on", you can make things happen, all sorts of things. Imagine the switch, now move it . . .'

Bruno, sweating under the desert sun, screwed up his face in desperate effort. At least he had tenacity.

Spider looked sullen. Losing patience, he jerked a thumb at Bruno. 'Why him anyway? He's so stupid—isn't there a quicker way? Do we have to stay out here in the middle of nowhere?'

'There are no short cuts,' Ragnarok said gently. 'You have to take the first step yourself. Keep trying.'

Again and again, Ragnarok took them through the loosening-up exercises, but after the second day only Bruno still had his heart in it. Spider, looking for immediate gain and not finding it, was no longer trying.

'Years of this?' he asked in disgust. 'So what happened to your other apprentices?'

'After they made the breakthrough—those that succeeded—they went on to training school. Relax and try again. Keep at it.'

And, each night, Ragnarok vanished.

On the third day, there was an interruption. Spider, his mind wandering, was the first to hear. He called: 'We've got company.'

Ragnarok turned to see black dots in the sky. A roving band of jato boys had found them.

'Don't panic,' he urged. 'Use your talent—like this!'

Ragnarok vanished, appeared again standing on a rock crag looking down at them.

'Easy for him,' Spider snarled as the putt-putt of jatos grew louder and the machines lowered from a burning sky. The glossy black uniforms of the riders looked infinitely menacing.

Bruno, sweating fear, concentrated on levitating.

The jatos landed, jets silenced. The riders swung out of their saddles and came swaggering over, armed with knives and knuckle-dusters.

'What've we go here, then?' their leader demanded. 'This is our territory—you kids ready to acknowledge who's boss?'

Above, Ragnarok worried his beard, watching, calculating danger. Sometimes crisis was the prod needed to bring out talent.

Spider made no attempt to use magic as the jato boys closed in. He moved fast, fists swinging, legs kicking out. He broke through the cordon and ran for the machines, grabbed a jato and took off in a cloud of dust.

Curses followed him.

'Let him go—we've got this one.'

Bruno was submerged under a rush of uniformed bodies. He went down struggling.

Ragnarok hesitated. How long could he wait, with Bruno already taking punishment?

Then the fight in the gully changed character and he smiled.

Bruno was off the ground, floating, rising higher through the air, out of reach. The crisis prod had worked.

Ragnarok signalled the jato leader and they returned to their machines and moved off; one riding pillion. Even a manufactured crisis could work at times . . .

He brought Bruno gently back to the ground.

'Good, Bruno, good. We'll make a magician of you yet. That's a start, so keep practising. I don't want you to give up simply because the danger's gone. You've long years

ahead of you at training school, but you'll make it, never doubt that.'

'I did it, didn't I?' Bruno said in a tone of wonder. 'What about Spider?'

'He won't be back. That boy'll go far on his own, but you'll pass him in the end. In ten years you'll be one of us.'

And where will I be in ten years? Ragnarok wondered. Still talent spotting?

Bruno's face creased as he struggled for the right words. 'Spider, he was bright—why didn't it work for him?'

Ragnarok stroked his beard pensively. 'You might say, he didn't *need* magic.'

THE BLACK HOLE OF NEGRAV

by

COLIN KAPP

Having got away from Getawehi, Lt. Fritz van Noon now tangles with a stellar object the size of a marble. Only trouble is, this marble is hungry. Vertical thinkers often have trouble coping with sf concepts. Lateral—or divergent—thinking is basic to much sf and is a more positive approach to a problem even than keeping an open mind.

THE BLACK HOLE OF NEGRAV

'THE BASIC philosophy behind the Unorthodox Engineers is simple,' said Fritz van Noon. 'As our penetration of deep space continues, so communications and supply lines grow longer, finally impossibly long. And the transport costs of even simple items become disproportionately high.

'For instance, the price-penalties of space-freight are such that a simple spanner required on Aldebaran-seven costs sixteen times its weight of platinum on Terra. Assuming you can afford it, delivery time by hyper-ship can be anything up to three years.'

He waited until the buzz of conversation in the audience had died again. Then he continued. At his side, he was aware of Colonel Belling's dark scowl of disapproval; but decided to ignore it.

'If we're to take advantage of the new space-territories the hyper-ships are opening up to us, if we're to build out on the Rim something men can use as the foundations of a colony, we need engineering—and we need plenty of it.

'So who should we send? Mechanics who can't obtain any steel? Engineers whose nearest machine shop is fifty light-years away? Or should we send the men who can make a plough out of a stick, a stone and a length of creeper? The answer's obvious. You can send a few tools; but the thing that counts most at the edge of the galaxy is man's own unchannelled ingenuity—the ability to use anything available to your own peculiar advantage.

'And that, Gentlemen, is the function of unorthodox engineering. It's the habit of breaking with the traditional

disciplines and learning how to construct the nucleus of a functional civilisation out of bits of string and matchsticks, if necessary. To hell with what it says in the book. It may not even look like engineering—but if it works, it's justified.'

Shortly, the chairman brought the assembly back to order.

'Well, now we've heard both sides of the argument—orthodoxy versus unorthodoxy in space engineering. I'm sure we've all been greatly enlightened, not to mention amused, by Lieutenant Van Noon's account of railways built over small volcanoes, and the use of harps as electrical power generators. While van Noon's approach may not seem as elegant as some of the precise and mathematical approaches we've heard this afternoon, it's brought some very practical solutions to some very intractable problems. I therefore suggest we conclude this session with an opportunity for questions from the floor. Of particular interest would be a problem which orthodoxy has failed to solve.'

At his side on the speakers' platform van Noon felt Colonel Belling stiffen with anticipation, and knew that his worst fears were about to be confirmed. Belling's consummate hatred of unorthodoxy was almost a legend, and a public showdown before such an influential audience was too good a chance for the Colonel to miss. The next question would be a loaded impossibility. Regardless of who delivered it, Belling would have had a hand in the draft.

A young officer in the uniform of the Space Territories Administration rose to his feet. He was obviously one of the new breed of academic officers not long from space college. He began with his own introduction.

'Captain–Administrator Wilson, Rim Territories Survey. I've been fascinated by van Noon's treatise on the uses of unorthodoxy. It so happens that out on the Rim we have a good example of one of these intractable problems. It involves a large asteroid called Negrav, which is part of a

complex binary-planet system in orbit around the star Springer 218G.'

Van Noon stole a look at Colonel Belling, whose expression of smug innocence confirmed his worst suspicions. This problem had been hand-picked by a master.

'Perhaps I should explain,' continued Wilson, 'that the companion planet in the binary, tentatively named Leda-four, is a body of considerable interest to us because of its mineral resources. To gain maximum effect from our exploitation of these minerals, however, we require a three-year detailed space survey of Leda. It's impossible to tie up a ship for this length of time, but an ideal observation platform would be the associated asteroid.'

Fritz van Noon listened to this with a patient frown. So far nothing unusual had emerged. Therefore, whatever the problem was, it had to be a honey.

Wilson was deliberately avoiding looking at Belling. 'I said the asteroid was called Negrav. The reason for this is that the centrifugal force of its rotation at the equator exceeds the gravitational attraction of its mass. Thus, except at the poles it has a negative gravity averaging about point seven Terrestrial. Unfortunately, because of its spin alignment, it's a point on the equator we need for observation.'

'If I understand you rightly,' said van Noon, 'yours is a simple problem of securing an observatory on to a surface which exhibits an effective negative gravity. This is slightly more difficult than free-fall work, but not much. Any good adhesive can get you started, and once you've obtained a reasonable foothold, you can surely anchor into the surface by any of a great number of standard methods?'

Wilson took the point sedately, but caught Colonel Belling's eye and was hard-put to restrain the amusement which welled suddenly inside him.

'It's not quite as easy as that,' he said, striving to retain his academic pose. 'I said that Leda was one of a binary pair. Negrav's only an asteroid, and not large enough to effect the gravitational balance substantially. Rather, it

functions as a satellite to the other component of the binary—which is a rather small black hole.'

'A what?' said van Noon, sitting down weakly.

'A black hole,' said Wilson, happily, under the approving eyes of his triumphant mentor. 'The second component of the binary is a small black hole of roughly terran mass, which has an event horizon of about one centimetre.'

'And Negrav is in orbit about this?'

'A very close orbit.'

'How close?' asked Fritz suspiciously.

'It actually shaves the surface. Our problem on Negrav isn't getting an observatory to adhere, it's how to stop it being eaten by the black hole in grazing orbit—no pun intended. Orthodoxy doesn't have any good answers. I'd be interested in hearing the unorthodox approach.'

Colonel Belling was still laughing the next morning. When van Noon received a summons to report to his superior's office at the Engineering Reserve he sensed it was only so that salt could be rubbed into an already smarting wound. It made a change, however, to find his commanding officer in a congenial mood so early in the morning. This was a situation van Noon had plans to rectify.

'Ah, Fritz! Sit down! I've to congratulate you. Your reputation for unorthodoxy is unimpaired. Nobody ever gave such an unorthodox reply to a question at a Space Engineering Symposium. I was particularly intrigued by what you told him to do with his black hole.'

'It was deliberate provocation,' said van Noon. 'A put-up job designed to discredit unorthodox engineering.'

'Which it did beautifully,' said Belling, happily. 'I always said I'd show you crackpots up for what you are.'

'Then you haven't heard yet?' said Fritz, carefully.

'Heard what?' Belling's suspicion hardened like a forgotten ladle of molten steel passing through cooling-point.

'General Nash was in the assembly representing Space Engineering Command.'

'Of course. What of it?'

'Well, the Unorthodox Engineers have pulled him out of several holes in the past. I think he saw the chance to return the favour.'

'What chance?'

'That building an observatory on Negrav wasn't entirely a leg-pull. With respect, Colonel, you were so busy looking at the absurdity of it, that you overlooked the possibility there might be a genuine need. It so happens there is a need. The Negrav–Leda complex promises to provide easily-won mineral resources for a large sector of the Rim, avoiding the long hauls from Terra.'

'Go on, Fritz,' said Belling, grimly.

'Well, General Nash got together with the Director of the Space Territories Administration and offered to build the Negrav observatory for him. The Director was delighted, and an inter-Service contract was drawn up on the spot.'

'And?' asked Belling. He had the look of a man who knew what the answer must be, but hoped against hope that the truth could not be as bad as he imagined.

'The contract makes this Engineering Reserve responsible for the building the observatory,' said Fritz. 'That means it'll be your pidgin.'

'I'll never forgive you for this, Fritz.'

'But I did nothing. It was you who had the matter raised.'

'I still shan't forgive you. It has all the hallmarks of your devious organisation.'

'And it raises a good question, Colonel. Who're you going to send to Negrav? An orthodox engineering team—or a bunch of unorthodox crackpots?'

'I still think it was a heck of a tough way of proving your point,' said Sergeant Jacko Hine.

Van Noon scowled at his second in command. 'Not even Colonel Belling believes me, but I had nothing to do with us being sent to Negrav. The construction orders came down from General Nash, and Belling had to recant on his

orthodox approach because there wasn't an orthodox way to do it.'

'I suppose it never occurred to you that there might not be an unorthodox way to do it, either?'

'The thought did strike me, but I dismissed it as unlikely. Just how the heck we're going to do it, I don't have a clue at the moment. But at least it puts us marginally up on Belling's approach.'

'How do you figure that?'

'Belling's certain it can't be done. I'm certain that it can. So all we have to figure out is how. That simplifies the problem no end.'

'Not for me it doesn't,' said Jacko Hine. 'You'd better clue me up on black holes. If we're to tangle with one, I'd like to know something of the enemy.'

'The classical theory's that of the collapse of a burned-out star. Once a star's used up its nuclear fuel the radiation pressures holding it up fall right away. It begins to contract under its own gravity. The size of the star controls how far the collapse can go. But for a star upwards of twice the mass of our own sun, no known physical process can prevent it continuing indefinitely. The whole star's swallowed by its own gravitational pull. It creates a small region with such an intense gravitational field that not even light can escape from it—this is what's known as the event horizon.'

'Hence the name black hole?'

'Sure. Light—or anything else for that matter—can be drawn into a black hole by the intense gravity, but nothing, including light, can ever get out again. It's a one-way hole in space.'

'What happens to the things it swallows?'

'Virtually crushed out of existence. Everything, including the original star, ends up as a point of infinite density, which is known as a singularity. It's the ultimate state in the compaction of matter.'

'So how big is it?'

'We don't know about the size of the singularity; but the

size of the event horizon is determined by the mass contained in the singularity. For a collapsed star of around two solar masses, this would be a couple of kilometres in diameter.'

'But Wilson was speaking of one about a centimetre in size.'

'There's another possible way by which black holes could have been formed. This is in the big bang which began the universe. Theory has it that baby black holes of a mass around ten to the minus five grammes and ten to the minus thirty-three centimetres in diameter could have been formed then and would have been wandering space ever since, consuming whatever mass they chanced to find in their travels. It's entirely possible for one of these mini black holes to be able to eat an entire planet and still not finish up much larger than a marble. At a rough guess that's what's happened to Negrav.'

'It gives me a very curious feeling,' said Jacko, 'to think of a little black hole which could eat a planet. The more I hear of this expedition, the less I begin to like it. As I said just now, I think you've chosen a heck of a tough way to prove your point.'

The hyper-ship of the S.T.A. had carried them out to Chronos, on the Rim. From there a slower Navy vessel—though still one with hyper-light capacity—had taken them on to the S.T.A. base on New Australia. By work-vessel it was then only a three week luminal trip to the star Springer 218G, with its curious binary satellite and the asteroid Negrav. When they were within two days of the Negrav contact, van Noon called a conference of his five-man team.

'Now you've all read the preliminary S.T.A. survey report on Negrav. When we get within telescope range, we'll be able to supplement what we know with our own observations. I hope to be able to discover a few items which the S.T.A. observers haven't mentioned because they weren't looking specifically for them. It's highly unlikely that Negrav is totally composed of nickel-iron alloy, or that its entire surface is as smooth and unbroken as the S.T.A.

report suggests. Initially we'll need to establish a foothold, and this'll have to be well below the orbital path of the black hole, so what we want particularly is a deep fissure or crack which we can hook into and work safely below the black hole.'

'Check!' said Jim Fanning, the U.E. geologist. 'But if the S.T.A. photographs are to be believed, you'd stand more chance of hatching ball-bearings than you do of finding fissures in the surface of Negrav.'

'I'm aware of that,' said Fritz. 'The theory's that Negrav was once a full-sized planet, and all we see now is a remnant of the core. The rest of it's been eaten by that darned black hole. But I'm hoping at least for a blowhole or some form of depression. The frequency with which the black hole sweeps the surface gives us less than thirty-six hours between touching the surface and getting safely tucked down underground out of its way.'

'If I judge you right,' said Jacko, 'you're thinking of building the observatory beneath the surface?'

'We obviously can't build on the surface, because anything on the surface gets eaten by the black hole. Besides which, it makes sense in other ways. Below the surface you don't have to bring in construction materials. You simply carve out the shape of the cavity you want. Also you can make use of the negative gravity, because the centrifugal force'll drift you towards the roof of the cavity, thus producing a semblance of positive gravity. Once the observers get used to making their observations by peering down through windows below their feet, it should be a fairly effective working situation.'

'All of which sounds very nice,' said Fanning. 'But I foresee a couple of practical snags. Like how do we get in deep enough quick enough to avoid being eaten by the black hole? And having got into the surface, how do we carve an observatory-sized cavity in what promises to be a very strong nickel-iron alloy?'

'I admit it may be tough,' said van Noon.

'Tough!' Fanning was aghast. 'Blasting won't do much

more than deform the surface, and oxy-acetylene cutting could take a lifetime—assuming you could get the supplies. So you're largely back to processes like drilling and spark erosion plus the occasional handfile. At a rough guess, Colonel Belling was exactly right when he said it couldn't be done.'

'I've told you all before,' said van Noon, sternly. 'Physical limitations aren't absolutes. They're a state of mind. They said iron ships wouldn't float. They reached that conclusion because they hadn't taken all the facts into account. From this distance I can't see the answer to the Negrav problem either. But I'm sure as hell there is one. All we have to do is find it.'

When the S.T.A. work-vessel reached its keep-station around Negrav, subsequent observations did nothing to support van Noon's optimism. Negrav *was* a ball of solid nickel-iron, and its surface was flawless and honed to a micro-finish which would have done credit to a precision ball-bearing. Because of its small size, the black hole was not visible even with the most powerful telescopes available. Its relentless orbit around Negrav—or rather the orbit of the asteroid around it, which came to the same thing relatively speaking—had for some millions of years ceased to take more than microns of further material from the surface.

Now the black hole's path hovered millimetres above the surface of Negrav and pursued a progressive rotation which effectively swept the entire sphere over a period of thirty-six hours. The position of the black hole was known with mathematical certainty at any time, but liberation and other effects of the binary on the orbit of Negrav introduced an uncertainty factor. The black hole's progress across the surface had to be described in terms of statistical paths rather than positional lines. In practice this meant that thirty-six hours was the longest period any point on the surface of Negrav could be guaranteed safe from the marauding black hole.

'Which isn't long enough,' said Jacko Hine. 'Working under space conditions and negative gravity, we wouldn't have time to cut far enough into the surface to be any significant use. We've not only got to get into the hole, but around some considerable corner to prevent being drawn out by the black hole's gravity.'

'How far d'you estimate we could penetrate in thirty-six hours?' asked van Noon.

'If the spectroanalyses of the surface material are correct, we'd be hard put to remove more than a cubic metre with the tools available. And once we get deeper, the work would slow considerably because we could only keep one man at the face.'

'That's not good enough,' said van Noon. 'I'm going down to Negrav myself to study the problem from the surface.'

'If it's not a rude question, how do you intend to hold to the unbroken surface against negative gravity? Chewing gum?'

'No, permanent magnets. Nickel-iron of that structure ought to be highly magnetic. If the negative gravity's only point seven I should get all the attraction I need from a fairly small magnet pack.'

'Here's hoping the sunshine doesn't take the surface over Curie point,' said Jacko. 'Else we're going to have a right game fishing you out of orbit around the small black hole.'

If he was being strictly honest, even van Noon would have admitted his confidence had fled as the little lifecraft dropped him towards Negrav's implacable surface. The nearer they approached, the more smooth and polished the asteroid's surface appeared, until from twenty metres up he could see the perfect reflection of the lifecraft mirrored in the giant metal ball.

The first problem was to secure a contact with the surface. While the power manoeuvrings of the lifecraft could keep station over a particular point on the asteroid, the problem of trying to attach an assembled magnet package to the surface was akin to trying to throw it

twenty metres vertically above his head. It was not until he had experienced the situation that he began to appreciate the reasonings behind Jacko's assertion of impossibility. What he had failed to accept subconsciously was that any work in negative gravity was akin to working on the ceiling, and that any drilling would have to take place in a 'hands down, feet out' position, which was both unnerving and extremely tiring. Jacko's estimate of a cubic metre of material removed in thirty-six hours began to look wildly optimistic.

After a series of hair-raising manoeuvres by the lifecraft, the pilot managed to bring van Noon within striking distance of the metal 'ceiling'. After a few breathless moments, the magnet package stuck and the long cable trailed outwards with Fritz swinging uncertainly on the end of it. Thereafter he had to climb up the cable to reach his destination, which was no mean feat despite the lightweight flexibility of his spacesuit. This did not accord at all with his ideas on how a conquering hero, even an unorthodox one, should reach the planetary body of his choice.

Having secured himself in a nest on the cable, he began to probe the surface above him. A small drill bit cleanly but slowly into the metal surface, though he was afraid to exert too much pressure lest he should lever away the magnets which held him there. He dutifully collected samples of the swarf which came away, tapped the hole, and screwed in a prepared eyebolt to which he attached a second line. More secure now, he brought up a larger drill and drilled a hole sufficiently large for a second eyebolt to to be inserted completely recessed below the surface.

This was the first permanent 'foothold' secured on Negrav.

'Getting any ideas, Fritz?' Jacko's voice came over the headphones.

'It strikes me that with the small size of the black hole, the chances of any particular attachment to the surface being eaten in any one orbit are negligible. If we were to

suspend an off-standing platform from the surface and attach it by more than an adequate number of cables, we could give ourselves a relatively safe work stage. Furthermore, it would be more comfortable than this fly on the ceiling approach.'

'Shall I go ahead and organise a platform?'

'Not yet, because the chances of cutting our way in seem quite as remote as Jim Fanning predicted. There has to be an easier method. Before I leave, I want to see what the explosive charge will do. But I don't really have much hopes unless the stuff is a lot more friable than it seems.'

'Check! When you get those swarf samples back we'll have some idea of the answers anyway.'

Van Noon attached his explosive package to his first eyebolt, carefully levered free his precious magnetic pack, then dropped down the cable from the second eyebolt to make the precarious rendezvous with the lifecraft. When it had stood off to a safe distance, he fired the explosive charge by radio.

The flash was impressive because of the highly reflective surface. The destructive effect was negligible. A further close pass in the lifecraft revealed only the barest depression in the solid metal surface. A slight element of plastic flow had taken place, producing an extremely shallow crater, but there was no evidence that any material had actually been removed.

Van Noon returned thoughtfully to the work-vessel. On the face of it his exploratory trip to the surface of Negrav had been a failure. They had learnt nothing they did not already know, and the few straws at which he had clutched had disappeared like vapour in a vacuum. The problem of building an observatory on Negrav appeared as intractable as ever. As the hours wore on, however, he developed the curious quizzical look at the corners of his eyes which signalled he was far from being beaten.

He acquired the best telescope the work-vessel possessed and spent hours viewing the surface of Negrav, imagining he could see the small black hole as it sped hungrily across

the surface. The optical detection of such a small object from this distance was an impossibility, and his patient perusal of the scene began to worry Jacko Hine.

'What's the score, Fritz?'

'One up to Negrav. Our turn to play.'

'Are we still in the game?'

'Very much so. Negrav's going to have its observatory, and we're going to build it.'

'Crazy like a fox!' said Jacko.

'Am I? You remember my theme at the symposium. The ability of the unorthodox engineer is to do the job with anything he can lay his hands on. Well, Negrav's a classic set-piece—the problem and the answer bound together in a single cosmological package.'

'You need to be joking!'

'Think about it. Ours is a problem of method. Cutting's too slow, and blasting's ineffective. But suppose I gave you a tool that'll not only cut nickel-iron without effort, but will also consume the detritus? Suppose this tool needs no external power supply, and the tool wear is so low that it even finishes up marginally larger than it started. And all for no transport costs. Couldn't you do the job with that?'

'Yes . . . but!'

'Our cutting tool's right down there, Jacko. And for a bonus we get an eternally spinning workpiece to go with it. No lathe required. All we need to arrange is the traverse mechanism. With the black hole we can cut a toroidal cavity right around Negrav's equator, and they can build a hundred observatories inside there if they like.'

'Fritz,' said Jacko, 'this time you've surpassed even your own idiot genius. But there's one tiny point you've overlooked. You can't pick up a black hole and use it as a tool. You can't hold it. You can't even approach it. It'll utterly absorb anything you can fling at it.'

'All that's accepted,' said van Noon. 'But when you've a job to do and there's no conceivable way to do it, there's only one approach left open to you. You have to exercise some good old human ingenuity.'

The work-vessel took them back to the S.T.A. base on New Australia. This was the nearest point on the Rim where Fritz could find anything like the computer capacity he needed. He would have preferred to have gone back to Chronos, but was unwilling to waste the time while his enthusiasm was still at fever pitch. Once they had become convinced that van Noon was intent on going through with the scheme, his team, too, had become infected with his eagerness, and their deliberations had considerably refined and improved Fritz's initial ideas.

The S.T.A. technicians on New Australia listened to van Noon's proposals with critical alarm, and sent a message by subspace radio to Terra for confirmation that the project could proceed. In the meantime, Fritz's computing was allowed to go ahead.

The message which came back from Terra read:

'IF VAN NOON WANTS TO STICK OUT HIS FOOL NECK ON A SCHEME LIKE THAT, DONT STOP HIM. WE MIGHT GET LUCKY! SIGNED BELLING, COMMANDING ENGINEERING RESERVE.'

Van Noon could almost picture the gleam in the colonel's eye as he penned the second sentence. Nevertheless, he received all the help he needed from the S.T.A. staff on New Australia. With his precious calculations completed, and sufficient supplies for the job, he returned with his team to the keep-station around Negrav to begin the careful observations on which the success of the operation would depend. It was fairly obvious that the rest of the universe regarded the project as insane. There were moments when van Noon was not too sure himself. Nevertheless, the future of unorthodox engineering was riding on his back, and having declared his intention, he was unable to retract.

Above all things, timing was critical. The accurate gauging of Negrav's rotation was aided considerably by a huge dyespot which Jacko managed to produce on the surface. This was achieved in the course of a hair-raising approach to the asteroid in a lifecraft which was carefully manoeuvred while the dye was sprayed on to the metal

'ceiling' from pressurised canisters. With the spot in place, the rotational speed of Negrav was determined with an accuracy previously unobtainable, and van Noon's calculations were complete.

By far the hardest part of the operation was to give the order to proceed. Not only were the dangers considerable, but the timing needed to be immaculate and the positional accuracies held within very small limits. Additionally, there were still a few unknowns which added not only to the hazards but also to the virtual certainty of unorthodox engineering becoming a standard joke throughout the universe if things went wrong.

Having rehearsed and re-rehearsed his team, van Noon finally reached the critical point, and gave the fateful order. Once the first lifecraft had left the work-vessel and headed towards the surface, there was no turning back. It was only when he had passed this point that he began to appreciate the immensity of the forces with which he played.

Once started, there was no leisure for further thought. Jacko Hine went down with the first lifecraft and attached his package as specified. The second lifecraft was on its way before he returned. The third and most critical package, van Noon took down himself.

There being no natural features on the surface of Negrav, he could only judge his position from the radioed instructions from observers on the work-vessel and the relative movement of Jacko's dye-marker. This made easy sense during the long space descent but when the orb of the asteroid began to dominate the sky he lost orientation. In sudden panic he had the lifecraft halted until he could recalculate his bearings. It was this hesitation that probably saved his life.

As he directed the lifecraft to continue the descent, a sudden alarm was issued by the observers on the work vessel.

'Look out, below! You're off course and running right into the path of the black hole!'

The pilot reacted before Fritz had time to formulate his instruction. Veering crazily away in a tight arc, the little spacecraft struggled to escape from the gravitational well of the black hole which was overtaking from the rear. Unless they could build up to escape velocity they were liable to be dragged irrevocably down into this hole to end all holes.

For a short time it looked as though they might escape completely. Then the full power of the lifecraft's tiny motors became insufficient to move them any farther against the intense gravitational attraction which now arrested and began to drag them back towards the surface. There was nothing the occupants of the lifecraft could do except sit helplessly as they were seized and thrown back on to the asteroid.

The touchdown, when it came, was unexpectedly mild. Fortunately their descent had been delayed by the lifecraft's motors just long enough for the black hole to speed on its uncaring way. The friction of the craft against the asteroid's surface was sufficient to prevent them being drawn in the black hole's wake. Almost immediately the gravitational spasm was over, and Negrav's own negative gravity spun them crazily back into space.

Dazed and shaken, van Noon checked his equipment, while the lifecraft pilot tested his craft. Miraculously there had been very little damage. The lifecraft, though dented, was still spaceworthy even though much of its instrumentation had failed. Van Noon's precious package, which had been the reason for the descent, likewise appeared to have suffered no permanent harm.

His timing, however, had been completely destroyed. This was a factor beyond recovery. Because of the orbiting black hole, the packages which had already been placed on Negrav had only a limited life expectancy. If his own package was not now put in place, the existing ones would all be destroyed before any new calculations could be made.

Van Noon took a chance. He placed the package with its magnet pack on the nearest part of the surface, knowing

that its position was far from being where he had originally intended. The results would be in the lap of the gods, but it was either this or make the long haul back to New Australia for a fresh set of supplies. Then, tired and disconcerted, he ordered the lifecraft to the work-vessel in keep-station above.

Compared to his trip, the rest of the journeys to Negrav seemed uneventful. No less than seven other trips followed, some achieving the desired accuracy, others varying. There was no time left, however, to make any corrections. Fritz had to suffer the errors and hope against hope that some overseeing deity would bring the project through. Otherwise he shuddered to think of the final results.

Then came the final phase. One after another in controlled sequence explosions flared upon the surface of Negrav; appearing as little more than pinpoints of light to the distant observers, yet in reality being massive charges of super-high explosive. The timing was accurate according to the original schedule; but because of misplacement of several of the charges, the net effect would be anything but optimum. There followed a long period of waiting, after which the remaining charges were fired.

As van Noon read the final collation of results, his heart sank like a stone. He had arranged to check the orbital velocity of Negrav so that it fell into a lower orbit around the black hole. In effect this meant that for a number of rotations the black hole would actually orbit inside the surface of Negrav. Then he had planned to correct Negrav's velocity so that the black hole would return to the surface leaving a toroidal cavity inside the asteroid's equator. Probably due to misplacement of the charges, the scheme had gone disastrously wrong. The black hole had remained inside Negrav . . .

Stupefied, he read the figures; but they no longer registered in his brain. Instead he saw the asteroid of Negrav being progressively eaten from inside by a small black hole so voracious that it could consume its entire host without particularly noticing the meal. Worse, if it remained inside

Negrav, the asteroid would disappear entirely. Van Noon did not much fancy being known for the rest of his career as the man who lost Negrav.

He called for the orbit of the asteroid to be monitored continuously, while he searched through the work-vessel's stocks hoping to find sufficient explosive to kick the asteroid's velocity up and bring the black hole again to the outside. A trip to New Australia for fresh supplies was out of the question because of the time involved. By the time they returned, Negrav would have been swallowed whole.

He was unlucky. The explosives he had brought from New Australia had been carefully calculated for the job, and the entire stock had been used. Nor did the work-vessel carry any stocks of its own. The fuel used by the lifecraft was not suitable for the job, and the nuclear-vector power-plant of the work-vessel was too dangerous to be considered. He briefly thought of trying to nudge the asteroid with the work-vessel itself; but concluded that the vessel was unlikely to survive the ordeal.

Disconsolate, he sat down again to check the results of the orbital monitoring. As he did so, he began to brighten considerably. When Jacko found him, he was chuckling uncontrollably, and tears of laughter were streaming down his face.

'You're the first person I ever saw get a belly-laugh out of a computer print-out,' said Jacko, warily. 'We don't have a strait-jacket, so I'd better give you a shot of tranquilliser. I'd advise you not to struggle.'

'Knock it off, Jacko! I've just received proof of the theorem that the deserving don't always get what they deserve. Alternatively, the unorthodox looks after its own.'

'Crazy like two foxes!'

'Look at these orbital figures, Jacko. And tell me what it was about the original problem we forgot.'

Jacko took the sheets of print-out and looked through them wonderingly. Then he, too, began to smile.

'Negrav's speeding up. If it continues to do that, the

black hole'll come outside again of its own accord—and soon.'

'Right! We forgot about conservation of momentum. As the black hole removes some of Negrav's mass, the asteroid gets lighter; but its initial momentum remains. Therefore it has to go faster, and climb into a higher orbit. It's a self-stabilising system because whenever the black hole removes some mass from the asteroid, Negrav itself automatically retreats from the attack.'

'So what're we left with? The same problem only with a slightly smaller Negrav?'

'No. Unless my figures are wrong, the black hole's been in there long enough to give us a concentric ball and shell effect—like a marble in a table-tennis ball. The increase in Negrav's speed is running up an exponential curve, so that when the black hole does come out it should do so at some considerable angle. With luck it'll only puncture the shell as it comes out, not eat it away. And do you realise the implications of *that*, my boy?'

'We were lucky?' asked Jacko uncertainly.

'Not only that. It means that Negrav will be safer from attack by the black hole than ever before. And if that cavity's the size I think it is, they'll be able to build a major base in there, not just an observatory. Then can mine Leda-four at their leisure, and use Negrav as an on the spot refinery and transfer station from which they can load hyper ships direct. It'll be the most valuable space facility on the Rim.'

As the figures had predicted, the black hole did come out of Negrav. It reappeared some thirty-two hours later and finally stabilised with an orbital separation of eleven kilometres. This new orbital distance was a measure of the amount of mass which had been removed from Negrav.

The next part of the exercise was to explore the cavity itself. This was aided by the fact that they could now anchor a structure permanently on to the surface to give them safe working conditions without fear of being eaten

by the black hole. With this new facility, the work progressed rapidly. Twenty metres in, they broke into free space inside the asteroid. Van Noon was the first through, followed by Jacko and an assemblage of powerful lamps. Once inside, they gazed into the vastness with amazement.

Fritz's ball and shell concept was substantially true, but random deviations in the rotation of Negrav had not produced a completely clean cavity, but rather one populated here and there with crazy spires and towers and bridges, and many vast columns which rose up to support the central core nearly a kilometre above the inner surface. Every line was curved in representation of some complex mathematical equation, as though designed by a mammoth computer programmed to seek out the ultimate in form and shape; and everything was cleanly cut and polished in flawless nickel-iron alloy.

They made a tour of inspection which lasted nearly twelve hours, and came out so impressed with the wonder of it all that it was difficult to believe that these fantasies had been the results of interference with their own hands. As an S.T.A. base, the situation was, and would be always, without parallel. Had it not been situated on the Rim, it would have been a tourist attraction with no conceivable opposition. They had juggled precariously with Nature, and had been rewarded with a marvellous demonstration of natural design that made them feel humbled and just a little bit afraid.

They found the points by which the black hole had entered and left the cavity, and had these welded closed. Over their original entry point they built a docking hatch and an airlock. Then then radioed New Australia for the S.T.A. to come and take possession of the prize. Captain-Administrator Wilson was the first S.T.A. man to arrive. He went in with a disbelieving sneer, and came out so passionately impressed that he broke down and cried.

From then on, the orthodox engineers took charge, ferrying gasses to provide a breatheable atmosphere in the cavity, bringing in power plants and treatment plants and

all the paraphernalia necessary to support men's existence in the far reaches of space. Their task done, the unorthodox engineers returned in triumph to Terra.

'You don't have to rub it in, Fritz,' said Colonel Belling, when next they met. 'I admit I was wrong and you were right. Unorthodoxy does have a use in unorthodox situations.'

'Actually we're only arguing about definitions,' said van Noon. 'Orthodoxy for us is the tools and techniques which have been evolved for dealing with our local Terran situation. We can't expect these to be the optimum for a completely altered set of conditions. What's orthodox in one part of the galaxy may be unorthodox in another. All that I'm saying is that the most useful thing we can take to any problem is an open mind.'

'Well, you've certainly proved your point. The S.T.A. are so delighted with their acquisition that they've asked permission to call their Negrav installation Base van Noon. I thought it only fair to let you make your own refusal.'

'Refusal?'

'That's what I said, Fritz. While you've been journeying back, I've been analysing your figures. As I read it, this was a battle you actually lost, but were saved by a most fantastic stroke of luck. D'you really mean to claim it as a victory?'

'In the circumstances, I take your point. But I claim the right to nominate my own alternative.'

'Which is?' asked Belling, ominously.

'How about Serendipity?'

The Colonel's face broke into a huge smile, and he rose from the table to clasp van Noon's hand.

'I'll go along with that, Fritz. I'll even buy you a drink on it. And while you're here, there's another matter I want to discuss. It concerns the tunnelling problem on Eggar-twenty four. Now, I've been thinking that with one of your black holes . . .'

A LITTLE MORE THAN TWELVE MINUTES

by

WOLFGANG JESCHKE

translated by

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At night, when the city is still and sleeps under its roofs, and the moon is bright and the heavens swim, the airfield of Kiara still sleeps on the edge of the ancient sun-dried desert where the heat and the dust burn, and men still journey over ash and leaf, sea and dust, cold and darkness. Do they all exist in the self-same moment of time or are they separated by the inescapable millennia? This hot dust-dry day is just an ordinary day, ordinary for a time in which time-travel is as boring as a train journey is for us. You just take a ticket and go in the Time-traverser. It takes you through the centuries where you do not yet exist, where your particles are still dispersed, still the dust of history. One of these journeys lasts just ...

A LITTLE MORE THAN TWELVE MINUTES

THE AIRFIELD stretched lazily in the sun.

Kiara.

Old earth, baked dry, steeped in history.

Heat.

The dust sparkled and made the few trees grey.

On the edge squatted the Time-traverser, its high windows yawning in the afternoon.

The wind slept.

The great machine, held in the sluggish stream of time by the threads of its brain, had stretched out its feelers, hovered over the abysses of the past, over ravines and gorges, over stagnant waters, had watched, its thin planks in readiness. But no foot searched for the step, no hand its hold, only paralysis, sleep and lifeless reflection.

A web of silver electrodes in the grey clouds of the great brain-case, a hand which touches you cautiously through the forehead, holding you, tiny threads of energy, a pattern, lying in the skull without difficulty, pulls your ego through switchboards and circuits in the great darkness of the corridors in which time runs.

The airfield stretched lazily in the sun, the airfield of Kiara, on the edge of the ancient, deserted city between the desert and the long dried-up river.

Heat.

I have a lodger.

Now you'll say that isn't anything special, and you're right. Many people have lodgers, congenial or unpleasant

and constantly annoying; but as you'll see, mine is still somewhat special. Both of us live in the same room in fact —yet I've never seen or heard him; I mean, really heard him.

A really pleasant lodger, you'll be saying; but wait a minute, just wait a minute! Listen further. I must assure you that I don't believe in ghosts, and moreover I'm not timid; but the thing does seem a trifle sinister to me. So I'll tell you something about the affair. I'd never dream of boring you; but I must none the less know whether others are in the same position as myself. Don't laugh. I have reasons for this assumption. I also have a lodger, whom I've never seen or heard, really heard, that is.

Except at nights.

I sometimes hear him at nights. He speaks very softly, almost inaudibly, although his voice comes directly into my brain and I can even block my ears up, indeed I often have to hold them closed in order to concentrate completely on his voice. 'Voice' is saying too much; it's an indistinct whisper, a hissing, a buzzing; I have great difficulty understanding and must often ask him to repeat things, or completely break off our conversation so I can get up and refresh myself. Sometimes I'm too tired or unable to concentrate, then I implore him to postpone the conversation. He consents, is never angry, for he has time, more time than you or I can imagine.

Much of what he tells me I don't understand and it seems confused and absurd to me; but I want to repeat it exactly as I believe I've heard it told to me.

He says he is in the Time-traverser. That seems to be a machine, a ship or something similar, but at the same time a gate through which you can travel in and out. This thing transported him from the future far into the past; but he seems to have missed his connection, and now he must wait. He says he is ancient and yet isn't even born; he isn't real yet, but he is among us and is everywhere, he is you and I, ash and leaf, sea and dust, stars and light, still disordered.

He says I am a telepath, out of the ordinary, that it is

rare for him to have the good fortune to have company. I don't know whether I'm a telepath, how should I? I have no idea whether I should be happy about it or not. But he must know, because he is ancient and has seen and heard much, although he isn't even born yet; perhaps I'm his great-grand-grandfather, who knows how many 'greats'. Who wants to know?

He has told me his story, a strange story. At night, when the city is still and sleeps under its roofs and the moon is full and swims shining over the sky, at the edge of dreams, then I can hear him.

I shall have to take care not to tell my neighbours about this thing. They would laugh, because they don't understand. Perhaps they would even take me for mad and their pointing fingers would make things difficult for me.

But you don't know me, and when you laugh, as you certainly will, it'll do me no harm, and you can't point a finger at me, because you don't know my name and where I live. But perhaps your reaction is completely different; you don't laugh, but draw a deep breath of relief and at last have the proof that it's not just you alone, knowing my story only too well, since you too have a lodger who frightens you and pains you. Oh, yes, I'm positive! There are many others who are waiting until the first machine is invented through which they can go back home, into the future. They wait for the Johannesburg Gate, as mine told me. Our century is like an enormous terrible waiting-room in which they sit, shadowy, invisible, clearing their throats, sometimes sighing, attempting a whispered conversation, others sleeping; nothing interests them any more, they've seen it all, much too much. Now they are waiting for the first train to leave; but the tracks on which they must travel are not even laid yet.

Sometimes they try to strike up a conversation with us.

Perhaps you hear their voices. At night, when the town has become still and the moon swims over the rooftops, then you hear them perfectly.

At the edge of a dream.

Perhaps . . .?

Kiara and heat.

And in front of the high windows, the afternoon on the airfield.

The dusty trees.

'It really ought to rain again, Gin. You know, a *really* good rain with thunder, jumping and dancing, letting everything overflow and making everything wet, really wet.'

He often said 'really' and was one of the last old officials of the Time-traverser. He was stout, wore a sand-brown uniform and sweated badly. His uniform was bleached almost the colour of the dust on the leaves, with dark flecks of sweat. His bald skull was burnt red by the sun and his old face laughed with a thousand wrinkles.

'Thunderstorms aren't allowed here, Chief. Electrical discharges in the atmosphere would be a catastrophe for the Time-traverser. You know that as well as I, Chief. The weather office will never allow any thunderstorms in this district.'

Gin was tall and slim, moved himself powerfully and smoothly, and didn't sweat. His skin was smooth and his voice somewhat colourless. His body was of metal and plastic tissue. He was an android and a normal official.

'Yes, I know, unfortunately. Only sun, sun and more sun. They don't even produce any breezes, these blighters, while we're here suffocating in this box. I just wish it would rain, in spite of all the prohibitions. Really pour down.' He imagined it and rubbed his hands cheerfully. '*Really* rain so that everything would be wet. Can you imagine it, Gin, everything really wet?'

'Naturally, Chief, but my organism reacts to dampness with little delight. My ancestors didn't come from the water like mankind's.'

'Your body is as shy of water as a cat's, I know. But I'd still like a thunderstorm today. A *real* thunderstorm, with tempests and rain. Pass me the weather card.'

'Yes, Chief.'

A ship dropped on to the airfield and the loudspeaker startled the afternoon. She escaped into the desert, and the great voice shepherded her back to the edge of the runway where the warehouse stood.

The heat remained.

'Twenty minutes stop in Kiara, then Vega, Aldebaran, Berenice and further . . .'

The restaurant dug itself whispering into place and settled down. It looked fresh and brightly coloured.

Guests came and sat down at the tables; one of them stepped out of the shadow and went diagonally across the ground to the Time-traverser.

The customer wore his hair long and was haggard. He looked dark, strange and from faraway.

He placed his big travelling-bag on the counter and his shoes were dusty.

'I'd like to make a journey, please.'

He said it slowly, almost timidly, like a boy who wants to buy something big.

His speech was also from far away, like his face.

'Where to?' said Gin and stamped the direction card.

'17 346 before Zahatopolk, please,' said the stranger and looked at his dusty shoes. His hair was jet-black and thick, and he was still young, 200 years at the most.

The rain man looked up and, wiping the sweat from his brow, said,

'In this department we only have dispersal to within two years. We also have no bodies at our disposal, you might know. I mean, real bodies, or——,' the official smiled, '—are you an esper?'

The stranger shrugged his shoulders and made an uncertain gesture.

'I draw your attention to the fact that the return journey is not possible before about 15 300 before Zah. You therefore have a long period to wait. Are you clear what that means? Will you go through with it?' The official seemed anxious.

'I know what I'm doing,' said the stranger. 'I'm prepared. A commission, you know. I must go there . . .'

He broke off as if he'd already said too much and paid the credits on the counter.

'Good. Then listen to me.' The official pointed to the giant timetable behind him. 'We are here.' His finger travelled far back along the timeline, covered with hundreds of coloured markings and numbers, to where the marks were more scarce, and still further. 'You land here.' He let a small blue disc click on to a point on the timeline where it stayed fixed. Gin stamped the position in the direction card. 'From here on we must let you carry on. You must wait about 3000 years for the time of return.' The official moved the timeline further up. 'Here.' He tapped on a green mark with his finger. 'The Time-traverser was invented 15 370 before Zah, but not until 70 years later are the first gates opened for travellers from our time sphere. I recommend the Johannesburg Gate, the first really serviceable Time-traverser, well-fashioned for the technical abilities of the time, open from 15 275. Very reliable. We've never had any trouble with it. From there we can bring you safely back. If you don't put in an appearance there, then we must make a search for you. A few centuries can elapse that way. It is therefore in your interest to be on time.'

'Yes, thanks. It's o.k. I'll be there.'

'Have a good time.'

'Thanks.'

'Don't mention it. Always your servant. Gin, accompany this gentleman to cabin thirteen.'

'This way, please.'

Gin went out. The stranger lifted up his eyes to the high honeycomb of the travel-cabin. The platform was suspended above.

The cell door groaned and clapped shut. Gin directed the gas into his face and watched him through the glass.

The stranger saw the android's face swim and began to soar.

The Time-traverser started. As the groping electrodes

penetrated his brain, it was like the long fingers of a soft hand in his hair.

He began to fly.

It became dark and cold and always faster.

Corridors of time.

Only the light grasp of the hand in his hair held him in the darkness, held him so that he might not fall and be lost.

He flew further and further over plains of ashes and night, yonder where his body was still dust and leaves, flowers and animals, you and I, stars and light, and everything together, disordered.

He lay powerless, leaning back in the cell while the point in the centre which was his ego (is, will be) raced over relays and points through electronic patterns, which it overlaid and reinforced, flew and flew over plains of ashes and night.

Sleep and lifeless reflection.

Kiara and heat.

'Gin, take a look at that. Have you ever seen books before, real books?'

He groped in the big, worn-out travelling-bag which the stranger had left open on the counter.

'Real books; true antiques.'

He carefully lifted one out and sniffed at it.

'It smells like God knows what.'

He leafed through it, but the marks were unknown to him.

He shook his head.

'A strange man, Gin. As strange as his books.'

'All men are strange,' was Gin's level opinion and he followed the light point on the timeline.

'That's your opinion, eh?'

The afternoon had ventured out over the airfield once more and stroked the foreign ship curiously and the open, shady tables of the restaurant.

The light point on the timeline was extinguished as it reached its goal. Gin turned around suddenly.

'I've got it, Chief.'

'What have you got?'

'I've been considering the data; somehow it came to me. Now I have it.'

'So what?'

'17 346 is the beginning of an old era on this planet which began on a cultural or religious event.'

'So? All the more reason for a sociologist or historian to look around there. Perhaps he's a space historian, that's quite the fashion now.'

'My knowledge gives no spaceflight yet in that century.'

'Ah, well, he wants something. It doesn't concern us. But he'd scarcely wait 3000 years without reason in the bargain. It's not amusement, I can assure you, Gin. Amusement is nothing any more, although I've experienced it once along the timeline.'

'I'd like to timetravel, too.'

Gin said this yearningly.

'That'd be a failure. It won't work with your delicate-circuit brain, fortunately, otherwise we'd have to scrape together bodies for you in the millennia. But tell me,' he turned round astonished, 'what feeble-minded electrician programmed you with such impossible wishes?'

'Not everything that I am, think, or feel is programmed,' said Gin. 'You seem to forget that I belong to the Self-Development models.'

'Well then, start developing,' said the old official, smiling. 'I'd rather have myself pensioned off today than tomorrow; but then who's going to climb into the box and fetch out the people that the Time-traverser has sifted from somewhere or other?'

'In view of that, a procedure should be evolved whereby a positronic brain can be worn hard without destroying it.'

'I hope so, Gin, because I've really had enough. I'm old. A thousand years in the service of the Time-traverser. For the Time-traverser it's nothing, another nought on the scale; but for me it's a whole mass of time.'

'Yes, Chief.'

The Time-traverser waited in the Johannesburg epoch.

When the stranger entered it the machine registered the identical brainwave pattern. The hand took hold and pulled him back over ash and leaf, sea and dust, cold and darkness.

Kiara.

A light point flashed on the Johannesburg Gate's marking and travelled up the timeline to extinguish itself at the starting mark of the Kiara-Time-traverser-Date. Simultaneously a bell sounded.

'He's back again, Chief,' said the android who had been controlling the instrument.

'Wake him up, Gin. I'll fetch him a glass of water. He'll have gone through a lot.'

When the stranger came out of the cabin, he limped.

You could see he was pale, despite his dark skin, and his shoes were just as dusty as they had been 3000 years earlier.

'Now,' said the official. 'Satisfied? Neat work, eh? No messing about. Exactly twelve minutes.'

He smiled complacently and pointed to the great clock over the instrument panel where, under a sign with the inscription 'Time-traverser-Relative-Now-Time at Destination', seconds in illuminated characters slipped by on a screen.

The stranger was somewhat numbed and looked at the instrument bewilderedly. The official was following his look and laughing.

'Yes, it's not easy to find your way here at first glance. Next to the standard time we measure the universal and relative times "Now" of this system as well as 7000 other relative times. Moreover that's an old machine. But take a drink first.'

He pushed the glass of water across the counter. The stranger rubbed his hands as if they hurt him.

'Have you hurt yourself?'

'No, it's nothing,' he said.

'Did you fulfil your mission, or did you have difficulties?' inquired the old official.

'Everything's o.k.,' he said. 'If I'd foreseen, though . . .'

'Yes, yes, I know. The wait.'

The stranger shook his head, but didn't answer. His eyes turned to the ship on the airfield.

'The ship's still there?' he said disconcertedly.

'Naturally. As I said: neat work. All of twelve minutes.'

The stranger groped absent-mindedly for the glass and his hands closed on the cool curve as if they were hot.

'Thanks,' he said, and drank.

'Yes, you've got time, but not much more,' Gin interrupted the silence. 'The ship leaves in three minutes.' He turned to go.

'Your bag, sir. Don't forget your bag,' said Gin.

The stranger looked around him as if he still had trouble finding himself back. But as he went with his bag and his books, he didn't limp any more. The light point had found its way back, the controlling instance had taken over the body again, had adapted.

When the door shut behind him, Gin said:

'He didn't seem to have had a good time.'

'That's not the machine's fault,' said the old man, 'that's the fault of time. No time is good.'

The restaurant had raised itself and gone away.

When the ship had leapt away, the afternoon returned hesitantly to the airfield, spread out its stillness and sunned itself.

The dust blew about and coloured the few trees on the edges still greyer.

The heat remained.

The stranger hadn't quite finished the drink. The old official, who was a man and sweated, poured the rest of the water into the palm of his hand and washed his face and neck contentedly.

'Gin,' he said, 'just ask in the transmitter whether I can get a channel open to Manila. There ought to be a connection open for me.'

'Surely, Chief.'

'It'll rain there.' He pointed to the weather chart. 'It's always raining there, on account of the tropical nature park,' and he enjoyed in imagination the streaming, splashing wetness on the skin.

Gin almost smiled as he tried to form an attraction for the notion, but the thought of wetness left him shuddering.

The uniform of the official, who was a man, now showed many small, fresh, dark splotches between the big stains under the arms and on the back.

In front of the high windows the airfield stretched lazily in the sun, and the wind blew in the desert on the other side of the old town.

Kiara.

Gate to a past full of secrets, for archaeologists, historians and odd characters, a fulcrum far out in the galaxy.

Earth.

Excuse me if I start again about me and my lodger, but you could be in the same position as I.

The sun shone on Saturday. It was cold certainly, but beautiful; and there we were, my friend and I, going out to the Max-Planck-Institute at Garching. My friend has a car, you know, I haven't, therefore I'd persuaded him to make the trip. So we looked around a bit, only from a distance of course, because you can only go as far as the barricade. Where they experiment with atoms they make such a circus about it with barbed wire and special passes that no one can even blow his nose.

It was all done and investigated and figures were given out which were staggering; but taking everything into account it all finally looked really pitiful.

We started talking to the porter and drank a beer with him. He told us they now have a new computer which can calculate so fast that it can do more in one hour than a hundred mathematicians could in a hundred years. My friend found that very impressive and the porter did too, but I didn't share their opinion. I believe that in order to

have time *really* within your grasp you must have machines capable of doing in one hour everything a hundred of these computers can do in a century.

And when you're sitting in the car and the heating isn't working properly, then you can feel sympathetic with these people who are waiting for the first Time-traverser. Isn't it the same with you? They'll be sitting round a long time yet before they can get back home. A lot of thought and calculation must be done generally. Of course one day it will have gone so far that they will make the gate, otherwise I wouldn't have a lodger. That much is clear. But that could still be a long time yet. Already the poor fellow has waited 2000 years. Just imagine it! In this terrible waiting-room of time, grey and shadowy. We should try to console them, be friendly towards them.

Perhaps we'll hear them this evening.

Shall we try?

At night, when the city is still and sleeps under its roofs, and the moon is bright and the heavens swim.

Then, when we're lying awake or in the half-sleep on the edge of our dreams ...

Just a whispering, a buzzing, a murmuring, quite near.

Then listen closely!

Perhaps ...?

THE ENEMY WITHIN

by

DONALD MALCOLM

The first starship back from the stars brought with her a problem to freeze the mind with horror—yet Neil Hallett, Chief Medical Officer, for the sake of the sanity of mankind had to handle the situation in a terse and matter-of-fact way.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

IT WAS the day all Earth had waited for: the return of the first manned starship after her journey to the Centauran system. Neil Hallett shared the excitement and the sense of belonging of everyone connected with the project; but in a quiet way. The designers and the engineers had been vindicated. Machines could travel to the stars and come back. As Chief Medical Officer, and a practising psychologist, his part in the success—or failure—of the project would now be under scrutiny. He had yet to find out if men were ready for the stars. He waited with a deep foreboding. The captain of the ship, Derek Armour, had sent a coded message as soon as they were within radio range. All was not well aboard. More than that he refused to divulge.

The news had been restricted to the highest executives on the project. By common consent, even the governments of the world were to be told nothing, until the nature of the trouble was revealed. Hallett did not waste his time in idle speculation as to what Armour's cryptic message might mean. There was a crew of four on the ship. Armour was American. The others were Alexander Khvalis, a Russian, Lim Soo of China and Henri Breguet, with dual Franco-British nationality.

The following day, Hallett and Franz Udet, the project's security head, were on Tsiolkovsky Station, in orbit around the Moon, awaiting the arrival of the starship. They gazed out at the sedate drift of the stars as the station slowly rotated.

'Armour's silence worries me, Neil. Silence always means trouble.'

Hallett was trying to identify various constellations. 'He didn't say that anyone was dead. And there is nothing we can do until the ship comes.'

'There are worse things than death. But, more immediately, how much longer can we maintain this secrecy? This is the most momentous news in history. Our very clever P.R.O. is beginning to show the strain.'

'We can rely on Zassetsky. He's a very charming—and disarming—man.'

Udet took up his contemplation of the Moon and the stars. 'You'll have heard that a reporter aboard a *World News* ship was considerably roughed up by escorting police for getting too close to the starship? That has sharpened a lot of suspicions. Now everyone from government heads down wants to know what all the secrecy is about and why they can't talk to the captain.'

Hallett was very patient. He'd been chewing his mental fingernails ever since contact had been made with the ship. That way it didn't show.

'When the ship arrives, only you and I are going to know what, if anything, is wrong. Let's wait till then.'

Two hours later the starship was sighted visually and the two men made their way to the little craft that would ferry them across. They listened into the navigational cross-talk and noted with apprehension that Armour was answering all the instructions. What was the matter with Khvalis, the navigator? Despite his outward calm, Hallett felt himself becoming worried, not merely concerned. Psychologists were not supposed to become as excited as ordinary human beings, which, in the circumstances, was unfortunate.

Finally, the shining ovoid of the ship was shackled in lunar orbit. Hallett found himself wondering if, in some way, the ship knew that she had been out among the stars? Perhaps, basically, all matter thrummed with the surge of universal life. The ferry jetted over to the ship, like a

minnow approaching a whale. The airlocks were mated. Hallett and Udet were suited up as a precaution and, under low gravity, they went along the corridor leading to the bridge, like two divers in a deep-sea wreck. Gloomily, Hallett thought that the analogy might be truer than it seemed.

The door to the bridge was open. Armour was facing the control console and had his back to them. He turned as they entered. Both men were tense, expecting the worst. But the captain looked normal, or as apparently normal as any human being could be after weeks in interstellar space.

'Welcome aboard, gentlemen.' He didn't smile or offer to shake hands or tell them that, when he died, he wanted to be buried so far underground that even an earthquake wouldn't disturb him. 'You can remove your suits. It's quite safe in here.' He smiled faintly as he added. 'After all, I've been aboard all of seven weeks—relatively speaking.'

'We'll keep them on, captain,' Hallett replied. 'Regulations.' His eyes probed the bridge. No evidence of damage or accident. Only, three crew members were absent: Khvalis, the navigator, Soo the flight engineer and Breguet, the scientist and doctor.

Armour noticed his questing looks. 'They're in the ... crew quarters.'

The slight hesitation skimmed Hallett's alertness and he filed it away in his mind. It was much too soon to start analysing Armour's behaviour and the conditions weren't right. No one knew what happened to the mind of a man who had gone to the stars. With patience, skill and some luck, he might find out.

Hallett recalled his feelings when he had been shown over the ship, not long before she had pulled away from the silvered embrace of the Moon. Some of his suggestions had been utilised by the designers. He had wondered then how men were going to survive in her. While not being spartan, she was only as comfortable as the weight ratio would allow. It would all be recorded in the tapes.

Armour stood aside at the door into the quarters to let

them enter. The common room was circular. Individual doors led to each man's cabin, wedge-shaped with the blunted point to the centre. Each also had individual access to and from the ship. Armour's cabin was for'ard, Khvalis, starboard, Soo, aft and Breguet, port. All doors could be locked. Hallett knew the layout. It had been one of his ideas.

Khvalis was lying on his cot, hands folded on his chest in the attitude of the dead, his eyes staring up at the ceiling.

Hallett knelt beside him as Armour said, 'He's not ... dead. None of them is dead.'

His peculiar emphasis the second time he said the word caused Hallett to turn and stare at him, to find the stare flashing back at him, like a reflected laser beam. Udet fidgeted by the door, watching, saying nothing. Hallett examined the Russian. And found nothing wrong, except that his eyes were blank, the pupils almost non-existent. He spoke to Khvalis. There was no reaction. He could have been dead.

Hallett stood up. For the first time, he looked searchingly into Armour's eyes. The pupils were much smaller than normal. That, too, he filed away.

'How long has he been like this, captain?'

The man's facial muscles twitched several times before he answered and he had difficulty with the words. 'About tre—three weeks.'

Almost half the journey, their time. The ship had been in a grazing ellipse and nothing short of disaster could have diverted her from the course which, eventually, had brought the ship back to the Moon.

'Take me to see the others, please, captain.'

They were in the same condition as Khvalis. The living dead. Soo had been in his present state for twelve days, Breguet for three.

Once back on the bridge, Hallett said, 'Franz: I'm quarantining the starship 'til I find out what's happening. Get the medical team over here from Tsiolkovsky and ask

Salmet to get in touch, also Zass. I'm taking the captain to his cabin.'

Armour had been moving about like a man in a dream and seemed to take little notice of their presence. He let himself be led away like a child. Hallett was in a quandary. He would have liked to sedate the captain; but he didn't know what effect drugs would have. Besides, the man didn't look as if he needed sedation. His reactions were frighteningly slow for the commander of a starship.

'Please lie on the cot, captain.'

Armour continued to stand. His face was twitching and momentarily his pupils dilated a little. Puzzled, Hallett watched the captain; but something intuitive prevented him from saying or doing anything. After some hesitation, during which time he appeared to begin to move towards a clothes closet, Armour went to the cot and sat down. He did not immediately lie down. He looked at Hallett; but there was no expression for the psychologist to interpret. He waited and Armour lay down and stared at the ceiling.

Franz came to tell him that Salmet, the project's Chief Scientist, was waiting to talk to him on the viewphone.

Leaving Udet with the captain, Hallett went to the bridge and told Salmet the situation. 'It's too early to tell what might be wrong with Armour and the others. Only a rigorous medical examination can help us if they've contracted disease.'

'It can't be that! They were never outside the ship, so they couldn't have been in contact with anything.'

'No one was outside—as far as we know. But something might have entered the ship.'

Salmet's coarsely handsome features screwed up. 'Possibly. Could their condition be psychological?'

'Ties broken with Earth, away from the womb, that sort of thing?'

Salmet nodded and Hallett answered: 'It could be. I'm going to try and question Armour, although I'll have to be very careful. Once or twice I caught him looking at me as if he had never seen me before. And it won't have escaped

your notice that the three men didn't contract whatever it is they have at the same time.'

'As if something were spreading. Yes. Zass has been in touch with me. I've instructed him to say that the ship is under quarantine and that the crew will be undergoing the normal medical and other examinations. That should hold them off. After all, the first men to return from the Moon back in 1969 were incommunicado for three weeks.'

'Not quite. At least people could see them and news reporters were allowed to speak to them.'

'We can't help that,' Salmet said, snappishly. 'It's in your hands, now, Neil. I'll be available at any time for consultation.'

Hallett had one more try. 'Can't we even release some of the ship's film, to keep them happy?'

'Not until I've personally seen every foot of it, we can't. There might be something on that film to help us, to help you. I'm sending a special courier to Tsiolkovsky to pick up the ship's log, computer tapes and the film record. He'll let you know when he arrives and you can send the stuff to him, suitably sealed up.'

Hallett returned to the captain's cabin.

'He's fallen asleep,' Udet said.

Armour seemed to be sleeping. He wasn't, apparently, in a coma like the others. That postponed Hallett's questions and gave him the opportunity to examine the ship's log and also the film record. The medical team would be arriving soon, so he'd have to be quick.

There were actually two logs, one oral, the other written. The former was coupled to the computer and he didn't have the knowledge or the skill to get it to give him the essential information. He started to read the log, pushing to the back of his mind the fact that the incidents related covered years on his Earth-bound time scale. He didn't like the feeling it gave him. There was nothing of significance until Day 13. Something had happened to one of the star sensors *and Soo had gone outside the ship to repair it.*

The entry brought to the surface of his mind a dread

that had lain submerged like a trapped mine, from the moment the captain's message had come in. Soo had been outside. In interstellar space. Why? Surely there were back-up sensors? He checked the log. There was nothing to indicate why Soo had had to go outside. Perhaps there was something on the film record.

One of the automatic cameras had recorded Soo's historic and frightening excursion. Occasionally, the film looked faintly blurred. But to Hallett's untrained eye, that meant nothing and everything seemed normal. Shutting off the projector, he continued to read the log. During the medical examination of Day 15, Breguet had reported that Khvalis was complaining of headaches and lethargy. As the days went by, the medical reports became more detailed, but the full transcripts were in the computer. On Day 24, Khvalis had gone into a coma and from then was fed intravenously. Soo began to complain on Day 25 and by Day 35 was in coma. On Day 37, Breguet became the next victim; the coma state came on Day 43.

And now Armour had it. Hallett was sure of that and doubly relieved that he and Udet had kept their suits on, irksome as it was. The communicator beeped and he opened the channel.

'Medical team ready to come aboard, Doctor Hallett. I'm O'Higgins, in charge. And we have a courier from M. Salmet along with us.'

'Fine, doctor. Please warn your men that they must keep suited up at all times. Check for leaks before boarding.'

'Understood. See you in five minutes.'

Hallett closed the log and put it away in the special drawer and locked it. Appearances had to be kept up. Udet returned. He'd been prowling about the ship.

'I can't see anything wrong,' he announced, sounding aggrieved.

'Soo was outside the ship,' Hallett told him, going on to relate what was in the log. They went to the airlock. Five people entered the starship. O'Higgins introduced himself, as did the courier, who showed his credentials from Salmet.

Udet escorted the medical team members to the common room, while Hallett took O'Higgins and the courier to the bridge. The ship's log, computer tapes and film record were verified, signed for and passed over.

'Could you ask M. Salmet to let me have a transcript of all the medical details right away, please?'

'If you want to get clearance from here, the computer could be coupled to the one on Tsiolkovsky.'

'Thanks. That would save time.' Hallett spoke to Salmet, who said he'd arrange it.

Hallett related all that he'd found out, or suspected, to O'Higgins, who was a Chilean from Valparaiso. Together, they went to examine the crew members. Udet met them just outside the bridge. One of the medical team was with him.

'Let's go back inside. We're in trouble.' He pushed the team member ahead of him.

'Wait a minute. You're not——'

O'Higgins got no further.

'No, I'm not Nurse Calder. I'm Serita Gordon of *World News*—the reporter roughed up by the police. And I've heard everything you told Doctor O'Higgins, so you can't send me away. That space station is lop-sided with reporters.'

Hallett looked helplessly at Udet.

'She said she had something to tell Doctor O'Higgins. How was I to know?' He was somewhere between apology and apoplexy.

'What happened to Nurse Calder?' O'Higgins demanded.

'About now, she should be leaving Tsiolkovsky, counting her credits. You people really should pay your nurses more.'

'I'll see she's arrested!' O'Higgins began to fume.

'Don't be so bloody pompous,' Serita cut in. 'With the whole world looking in, that's all you'd need. All I want is an exclusive.'

'You must want it very badly,' Hallett said, bitterly. 'Anyway, you're here, so do as you're told and don't interfere.'

'Don't worry. I'll be too busy listening and recording.' She produced a small recorder with camera attachment.

'At least we can stop that,' Udet said, piqued at being duped, and struck the equipment from her hand.

She merely smiled as Udet picked up the recorder. 'Suit yourself. I have a very good memory.'

'Give her back the contraption, Franz. It doesn't make any difference, now. No one's going anywhere for a while.'

'Thanks, Doctor Hallett. You're a gent.' The camera whirred as she spoke.

'Don't bank on it,' Hallett said, grimly. 'Just remember: don't get in the way.'

The computer began to give print-outs. The doctors read them while Udet sat grumpily in a corner and Serita kept clear and recorded all that went on.

Hallett looked up. 'Doctor O'Higgins and I have medical matters to discuss. They'd bore you and your audience. Mr. Udet will escort you to the common room.'

She contemplated protesting. However, he could be very severe with her. Casually, she laid down the recorder, still switched on, and started to precede the security man.

'You'd better take that with you, Miss Gordon,' Hallett reminded her.

'It was worth trying,' she said, lifting the recorder and going out.

Udet was back almost immediately. 'The captain! He's going berserk!'

In the low gravity of the ship it seemed to take them an age to reach the cabin. The two medical team members were holding Armour down on the cot, where he was struggling and making mewing noises that made the hearers shiver. His pupils were enormous; but as he watched Hallett saw them contract rapidly until they became tiny hard dots. Hallett took his pulse. It was normal.

'What happened?' he asked Udet.

'We'd just entered the common room when the captain burst in and attacked Miss Gordon.'

Hallett turned to her. 'Are you all right?'

She was slumped in a seat. 'It was horrible. Those noises. But, yes I'm all right now.'

Encased as she was in the suit, it was difficult to gauge her expression; but she sounded shaken.

'No damage to your suit?'

She rose hurriedly. 'I didn't think to check——'

Her voice quivered. She was scared again. She's human, after all, Hallett found himself thinking.

'I'll do it,' Udet volunteered.

'Keep a close watch on the captain,' Hallett instructed Mitchell, one of the medical team. The man was obviously none too happy with his assignment.

Hallett and O'Higgins again examined the remaining crew members. Two, Breguet and Soo, were still in coma. Khvalis was dead. He had gone a curious grey colour and his skin, formerly smooth and unblemished, had shrivelled.

'Come with me, back to the bridge,' Hallett said. 'I'm going to ask Salmet to arrange a post-mortem on Khvalis. He can get the top men to Tsiolkovsky in no time.'

'That won't exactly allay suspicion,' O'Higgins commented, as Hallett made the connection.

'Suspicion be damned! This isn't merely a case of four men returning from the stars with a mystery illness that has killed one of them, and is likely to kill the rest. The whole Earth, the bases on the planets, could be in mortal danger. M. Salmet. Hallett. Khvalis is dead. I want a post-mortem, as soon as you can arrange it, aboard the ship. This could be our only chance to save Armour and to find out what has happened to the crew.'

'I've had the world's top medical experts on stand-by, here, on the Moon, so that's taken care of. The complete medical data from the tapes will be coming through to you any time now. The film is undergoing minute inspection and analysis to see if we can bring anything up, but they're not having any success so far. We're managing to keep the wolves at bay, but not for much longer.'

Hallett cringed at the thought of what Salmet would say

if he knew that there was already a wolf—a wolverine—aboard.

'When the news gets around that specialists are on the way, we'll have to tell them something.'

'Why not some of the truth, as we know it? Tell them Khvalis is dead, cause unknown, and give them the usual pabulum about no danger and so on. It should hold them for a while.'

Salmet sighed. 'I don't think it's going to be as simple as that. Out.'

Hallett was beginning to find the suit irritating, but he dare not remove it. Whatever had killed Khvalis was still on the ship. Apparently it travelled from host to host, doing something to them that led, eventually, to death. Soo and Breguet wouldn't last much longer.

The computer began to chatter again and he and O'Higgins began to read the print-out.

'Lethargy, sleepiness, forgetfulness, loss of co-ordination, disorientation—it sounds as if they had about ten diseases simultaneously. We need that pm more than ever,' Hallett said.

The communicator beeped.

'Franz here. Soo is dead. Breguet seems about the same. And the captain is quiet.'

'Thanks. How is Miss Gordon, now?'

'Recovered. She's busy taking photographs and making notes on the background story. And she says she's hungry.'

'She'll just have to stay that way.'

The doctors finished reading the print-outs. There wasn't as much information as they'd expected or hoped for. There were gaps. Even with all the available evidence before them, they were unable to isolate the cause of the crew's illness. They went to the common room.

Serita Gordon said, 'Can I ask you some questions, Doctor Hallett?'

'Yes.'

She started the recorder. 'Do you think that the deaths here might be due to some psychological factor? The effect

of having travelled so far from Earth, loss of contact with humanity, and all that?'

'At this stage, I can't say. They trained for three years as a team for the flight and were given every sort of test the most competent psychologists in the world could devise.'

'But nothing could duplicate the real thing.'

He didn't try to be evasive. 'We seem to have evidence here that you are right.'

He turned to the other member of the medical team. 'Could you relieve Mitchell, please. I'm going back to the bridge, if anyone wants me.'

He happened to be looking at Miss Gordon when he said that and she smiled at him in such a way as to make him flush.

The m.t. member said, 'The door's locked!'

Hallett rushed out into the corridor and tried the other door. It swung open and he pushed it wide and looked into the room. The captain was sprawled on the floor, clutching a space helmet. The m.t. man, Mitchell, was gone. Udet came from behind Hallett and helped him to turn the body over. Armour was dead, his skin wrinkled and convoluted like the surface of a walnut.

'Go and look at Breguet, Franz. Be careful.'

The security man went out through the common room and came back immediately. 'He's dead.'

Unexpectedly, Serita Gordon crossed herself. There was no coquetry in her expression, now.

'Everyone to the bridge, at once,' Hallett ordered.

As they entered O'Higgins began to say: 'The team——'

Hallett cut him off. 'Armour and Breguet are dead. And Mitchell is loose on the ship—without his helmet.'

'The specialists will be here in a few minutes. Now they'll have a body each.'

Hallett was too busy bringing Salmet up to date to notice the remark. The reporter asked of no one in particular, 'What are we up against?'

O'Higgins said, 'A virus of some sort, that passes from host to host, leaving death behind it. I'm wondering if that

necessarily implies that, in order to survive, it will have to leave Mitchell, or can it exist without a host?'

Hallett's talk with Salmet had been brief and he said, 'I think it can. It seems certain that it attached itself to Soo's suit during his spacewalk and then entered Khvalis' body when Soo was back aboard ship.'

'Life can't exist out there, surely?' Serita said, gesturing vaguely at the void beyond the hull.

'On the contrary,' Hallett contradicted her, 'there are quite a few sophisticated molecules adrift in interstellar space. So, whatever got the captain and the crew doesn't really *need* a host. But it has evidently grown to like them.'

Serita paced about. 'It's horrible—waiting somewhere in the ship.'

'It'll use up Mitchell soon enough,' Hallett said, as if she hadn't spoken. 'While it's in Mitchell, we know where it is. When he dies, it will be free in the air——'

'Perhaps the air will kill it,' Serita said hopefully.

'That's straight out of *The War of the Worlds*, Miss Gordon,' he replied, trying to let her down as gently as possible. 'If it can survive anything hard radiation can do to it, then I doubt if air would harm it.'

A warning light on the panel showed that someone was at the airlock, awaiting admission.

'Franz: come with me to let the specialists aboard, and watch that we don't get jumped by Mitchell. The rest of you stay here and—melodramatic as it sounds—lock the bridge door and open it only when you hear two knocks, followed by one, then two more.'

They went out.

In a spare locker, somewhere in the vast ship, Mitchell sat on the floor, with his back to the wall. He wasn't in pain. But something frightening was happening to his mind. He was trying to puzzle out what had happened to him and was still happening to him. His thoughts were random and disjointed. He had to stop and force himself to think where he was. In a spares locker room. Yes. What was that . . .?

He was—who was he? Mitchell. I—AM—MITCHELL. Hold on to that. Identity was vital. Where was the . . . room. He couldn't remember that other word. No matter. Where was it? Images jumbled through his mind, like garbage being flushed down a drain. Sh—Ship? Yes, *ship*. Who am I? I am —I am—Great Christ in space! *Who am I?* My memory is like a fog. Something swirls into view, half-seen, then it's gone. He began to shake with panic. Must get out of . . . whatever it is. He stared around him. What was that bright . . . anyway, it hurt his eyes. Eyes. Get out. The storage racks, the floor, the ceiling, the door: all were grotesquely distorted and he recognised nothing. He stood up and took a hesitant pace, then stopped. *Nothing meant anything anymore*. Suddenly, panic stripped away the last vestiges of reason and he started to charge about the locker room, knocking over racks, all the while screaming and mewing.

The sounds penetrated the ship, reaching Hallett and Udet as they arrived at the lock. The doctor realised at once that whatever was killing Mitchell was doing it very quickly. The captain and his crew had taken quite a long time to die. Now, it would soon be free. The specialists outside the ship were buzzing for admission.

Desperately, Hallett wondered what to do. If he admitted the outsiders aboard, he might be sentencing them to death. The solution to the problem had been lurking in his mind for some time. If the people here, and, eventually, Earth's millions, were to be saved, then someone had to go to Mitchell and accept the virus, thus committing suicide.

Udet was looking at him curiously, while the specialists clamoured for attention. Mitchell was still screaming; but the sound was subsiding.

He thumbed the communication button and spoke without preamble: 'You can't come aboard ship. There is no time to explain now. Some people are joining you on the ferry. Then get away from here.'

He broke contact and told Udet: 'Get the others from the bridge and leave the ship.'

The security man started to protest.

'Don't waste time!'

He returned, bringing O'Higgins, Gordon and the m.t. member.

O'Higgins had grasped the import of the dilemma.

'Let me stay, Neil. You're too valuable to the project, too deeply involved——'

'That's precisely why I must stay. I helped to send the captain and the crew to the stars. This is the only way to ensure that what they did was worthwhile.'

The ship had gone quiet.

Clumsily, they shook hands, and the four people went into the airlock and closed the door. Hallett had never felt so lonely in his life. After a minute, the ferry lurched away from the starship. He went to look for Mitchell.

Piteous mewing sounds, muted, led him to what had once been a man. Mitchell was covered in blood after his frenzy in the locker room, and just barely alive. Hallett knelt beside him, and took his hand. Briefly, something kindled in Mitchell's blank eyes. Then he died.

Hallett hauled the body to the refrigerator store and put it away. He went back to the bridge and sat in the late captain's seat. The communications light was burning on the console. Salmet, trying to get in touch with him.

'Neil—get off the ship, at once. You know what happened to the others.'

'What will it solve if I leave the ship, Chief?'

'We can send the ship and the virus into the Sun.'

Hallett pulled the computer print-outs to him. 'That would merely postpone the problem. That virus is less than four light-years away from the Solar System. Eventually it will reach this sector of space——'

'There will be time to defend humanity against it. Leave the ship.'

'The solution is here, on the ship. If you don't hear from me within the hour, you'll know I'm dead. Then you can send the ship into the Sun.'

He flicked off Salmet's protest and began to study the print-outs again. It was difficult to concentrate, not knowing what, if anything, was going to happen to him. So far, he felt no different from his normal state. That proved nothing: most parasites didn't harm their hosts—until they were no longer of use. He took notes on a pad. The victims had suffered lethargy, sleepiness, forgetfulness, loss of co-ordination, disorientation. Hallett studied each heading in turn, going over in his mind the possible causes of each symptom. Fifteen minutes had passed and still he felt all right.

Thoughtfully, he circled the word *forgetfulness*. Memory was possible only through the presence in the brain of message-transmitters, such as serotonin and noradrenalin, which occur naturally in the brain. They carry information across the minute gaps separating the brain cells. And those transmitters *could be blocked, interfered with.*

LSD, for instance, was partially chemically similar to serotonin. Its use causes an apparent excess of transmitter material, confusing the brain which, for self-protection, tries to inhibit the action of the natural transmitter. A very small amount of LSD was enough to upset the mechanics of memory.

The production of noradrenalin could be reduced by the use of reserpine, while chlorpromazine checked the release of the transmitter. Then there were the enzymes in the mono-amine-oxidase group, which destroyed excess transmitter material. Alternatively, there could have been interference with the brain's RNA or the S100 and other protein molecules which were thought to assist the transference of information from short-store to long-store memory.

Somewhere there lay part of the answer. But why—so far—was he unaffected? Thirty minutes had sidled past. He asked Salmet a question. The answer was affirmative. He got up and left the starship.

The first person to meet him aboard Tsiolkovsky was Serita Gordon.

'I thought you would be back, Doctor Hallett.'

Most statements made at times like this were banal and hers was no exception. Not that he cared. He was too busy approving of her appearance, noting her gleaming cascade of dark hair, when most women sported ugly crops and her obvious rejection of the exposed mammary cult, brought on by yet another resurgence in Minoan culture.

'We'll talk about that later, Serita.' He glanced over her shoulder at encroaching officials and reporters. He whispered to her, 'If you still want that exclusive, it was a case of the biter bit. The virus killed Mitchell by destroying his memory. And he killed it. He was a registered junkie.'

THE HALTED VILLAGE

by

JOHN RACKHAM

The good folk of Chesterlea went about their usual Sunday occupations in the sunshine. It took a man with the oddity of Gordon Collier to see past the normalcy of that peaceful scene to the bizarre terror beneath.

THE HALTED VILLAGE

IT CAME as a wave of total conviction. Somebody knew it was Sunday. That somebody was afraid, shivering with the despairing, hopeless helplessness of non-understanding, the kind of fear that numbs. But she knew it was Sunday. That was the one coherent thought that came through the fear-wave. And it was ridiculous. Gordon Collier applied his foot to the brake rather more abruptly than was his habit, slowed his Mini, pulled it on to the grass verge, to a halt, and sat quite still. Ridiculous; but so convinced was that somebody who was wailing in his mind, that he twisted his left wrist where it lay on the wheel and consulted his watch. There, black letters in a white slot assured him it was TUE 21st. Which he had been sure of anyway. But *she* was absolutely sure, still. And almost out of her mind with dread.

Collier sat quite still, questing about as best he could to try to pin down the source of the panic thought; but the most he could manage was that it was over that way, to his left, and fairly close. He shook his head, trying to clear it a little, but that gesture had never worked in the past and it didn't now. The terror was still there, over that way somewhere. And it was so total that it began to infect him, to make a fine film of sweat break out on his face.

A passerby would have seen a dark-haired, square-built, homely-kindly looking man of about thirty, in no way spectacular, scowling into space and shivering a little. There was nothing about Collier to mark him out from many a thousand like him. Only he himself was aware that he had

any special talent. He lived with it, uneasily, all his mature life, but never before had it hurt him as it was doing now. Someone, girl or woman, very near, half out of her mind with fear, was so obsessed with the thought that this was Sunday that no other rational thought could break through.

He started the car again, driving very slowly, to the right-angle bend that would take him off the hill-crest road and down into the winding, bumpy, ill-kept way to the village of Chesterlea. On either side the road was steep-walled with bushes in green profusion and tall trees that cast a welcome shade. The mid-morning air droned with busy insect work and bird noise, and this would have been a particularly pleasant moment for Collier on any other day. For him a bird was more than a chirping trill and a flash of wings. To his odd senses there came also the wordless murmur of lively happiness, the innocent preoccupation with living. But not this day. That miasma of fear was too strong to allow anything else mind-room. All at once it grew very strong indeed, and gave way to 'words'.

'No!' it cried. 'No! Go away! All dead! Everybody ... dead!'

Collier stopped again, yanked the hand-brake on hard and scrambled out, following the hysterically repeated mind-gabble. He went up the bank-side on all fours, shoving his way through thick bushes, swerving around trees, until he found her, huddled defensively in a natural retreat, a narrow gap within a ring of gorse bushes. He paused at the unwelcoming thorns, eyed her wonderingly. She stared at him round-eyed, silent, made no move at all, like an animal at bay. Her mind still babbled at him crazily. He strove to ignore it, to stare at her intelligently, and then to recognise her.

'Mary Ellen!' he said, then, urgent but gentle: 'What's the matter? What are you afraid of?'

She offered no reply, kept quite still, only her eyes moving, flicking from side to side as if seeking some way of escape. And steadily, fearfully, her mind screamed at him 'Go away! All dead! All dead!'

He knew her barely enough to recognise, hardly enough to speak to. Mary Ellen was Chesterlea's village idiot. No one knew her surname, nor whether she had the right to claim one. Most people said she was a love-child, some that she had been abandoned, left by the gipsies when they had been forced to quit their encampment on the moors, along with the closing of the coal-mine. His own family had moved at the same time, away from the dying village to the nearby town of Stanfield. Twenty years ago. He could only just remember her from those days as a flitting, skipping, wild-eyed slip of a girl, no more than five or six, coming and going as the fancy took her.

He had seen her, briefly, a time or two since then, on his rare visits to this forgotten place. She must be all of twenty-five now, he thought, looking down at her where she cringed against the thorns, listening to the incoherent babble of her mind and wondering what to do. According to local gossip she was quite harmless.

'What's the matter?' he asked again, foolishly. 'What are you afraid of? I heard you crying . . .'

'Didn't!' she denied, suddenly and vigorously, and her blue eyes were indignant. 'Wasn't crying!' And it was true, as he could plainly see. Her face was grubby, but smooth under the dirt, and quite innocent of tear-stains. Her hysterical babble had ceased, as it always did for him when the person decided to talk aloud.

'I'm sorry,' he said, humbly. 'I thought you were in some kind of trouble, wondered if I could help you.'

'No!' Her rejection was flat. 'Go away! Let me be!'

'All right. I just thought, if you were hurt or something, I could take you to a doctor and get it put right, whatever it might be.'

Her blue eyes went wide in curiosity. 'Doctor? What's a doctor?'

The fear was abating in her mind now, pushed into the background by her wonderment at a new word. There was wonder in his own mind as he began to realise the extent of her innocence. If he could gain her interest, her

confidence, keep her talking, he might find out what was really wrong.

'A doctor,' he said, patiently, 'is a man who knows how to make you well again if you are hurt, or sick, or if you have broken something. If you scratch or cut yourself so that it bleeds . . .'

'Lick it!' she said, abruptly. 'Makes it better.'

'That's one way,' he agreed, noticing that her hands and forearms, and her shins, were covered in minute grazes and scratches. He had a sudden and almost painful pang of nostalgia for those long-gone days when he, too, had come home smothered in gouges from blackberrying. With an effort he dragged his thoughts back to the matter in hand. 'That's all right for little cuts and scratches, but if you got a really bad gash, lots of blood coming out . . . well, you'd need a doctor to fix it. There's a doctor in the village now. Didn't you know that?'

This was true. It was Collier's reason for being here this morning. The Stanfield *Weekly News* had long employed him at various tasks; making up a simple cross-word square, sketching the odd cartoon, producing the occasional filler of unusual information or inspirational verse, but chiefly to ferret out snippets of personal 'inside' information. Davie Dodds, the editor, appreciated Collier's flair for this, although he seldom stressed it, possibly because he wanted to hang on to something good, and if Collier ever got notions of being a 'real' reporter he would be very hard to replace. He had sent out his 'treasure' this fine morning to dig up something interesting about the new doctor in Chesterlea, of all places.

'Used to live there, didn't you, lad?' Dodds made the point. 'You know what it's like. Can't be more than a hundred folk there, all told. Never had or needed a doctor before.'

'That's true enough. There was always the first-aid post at the pit-head, or if it was something drastic they'd send for the ambulance from Danchester Hospital. I only ever saw it happen once.'

'There you are, then. This chap's name is Parker, and he's taken a lease of the old pit-head laboratory. Had it cleaned up and lot of stuff moved in. Means he must have money behind him, right? That was two weeks ago. No signs of trying to start up a practice. The local G.P.s in Stanfield either don't know him or won't talk. Danchester doesn't know anything, either. So what's he up to, eh? You go and see what you can find out.'

Collier had started out expecting a pleasant morning—and now this. He looked down at Mary Ellen and repeated: 'There's a doctor in the village now. If you're in some kind of trouble?'

'Not the village!' Her reaction was violent. Ducking her head she tried to cringe back further into the thorns. 'Nobody there. All gone. All dead!' Again he got that mental rush of fear, and the 'Sunday' feeling.

'Now stop that!' he snapped, losing patience. 'They can't all be dead or gone away, you silly girl. And it is *not* Sunday!' But even as he spoke angrily at her, from the drowsing sunlit valley below there came the gentle tolling of the church bell, quiet and far-off, a thin thread of sound over the murmur of woodland life about him. Chill fingers walked along his spine. He stared down at Mary Ellen, seeing her shrink even further into the thorns at the sound of that distant bell. He had a distinct and irrational urge to turn and run. Common sense took a hand. Run? From what? The simple sound of a church bell? Just the same, there was something very wrong here.

'Come on!' He offered her his hand. 'You come with me. There's something odd going on here, and I intend to find out just what it is.' She backed away from his offered hand, but he was insistent. 'It's all right. You'll be quite safe in my car.'

That brought her head up, and a sudden different interest. sensing the quick wonder in her mind he took advantage of it. 'That's right,' he said. 'A ride in my car. You'll like that, won't you?' And he kept his hand out and open, the way one would make overtures to a dog.

She straightened, eased away from the thorns, stood up, looked at him uncertainly. Now, for the first time seeing past the dirty rags she wore, he realised just how beautiful she was, beautiful in a vivid and disturbing way. Her wild hair, black as crow's feathers, shone with vigorous well-being, framing a face that was smooth and guileless, yet with a curious kind of knowing. Her eyes were the blue of deep water, and as candid as an infant's. Her skin, under the stains and smudges of dirt, was innocent of powder or paint and as silky as the bloom on a peach. Her mouth was its own red, needing no stain from a tube. All at once she smiled, her teeth startling white against her weather-tan. She reached and took his hand, came close.

'I like you,' she said, simple and direct. 'Not frightened now.'

His thoughts in turmoil, Collier gripped her fingers, felt that grip returned confidently, and started to lead her back to the road. The distant bell kept its regular striking, threading a continuity through his confused mind. He had known girls, many of them, but his peculiar talent had opened them too far, had given him insight which killed any hope of intimate social relationships. At the same time that depth of insight had helped him to be gentle and understanding, hence a target and a frustration for every designing female within miles. In simple self-defence he had developed an inner barrier against women in general, almost without being aware of it.

Now, with this half-wild, simple-minded yet utterly lovely, natural creature striding along by his side, he was confused as never before. Nothing verbal came from her mind now, just strong and warm emotion-feelings, and they were pleasant. At the crest of the bank-side he released her fingers and slid down to the road, there to turn and hold out his arms as if to a child, to encourage her to follow. Her dress at one time had been a green and white print of some kind. Now, where it wasn't stained, it was faded, the sleeves long since ripped away, the skirt, originally brief, equally ripped and ragged, the whole garment split down one side.

By some curious alchemy she looked as if she belonged to the woods, a nymph.

'Come on!' Collier urged, and felt foolish as he realised she could, in all probability, skip up and down banksides like this much more surely than ever he could. Out of his confusion came the wonder that the local young men had not come 'wolfing' after this lovely creature long ago, followed instantly by the wry realisation that there weren't any 'young men' in Chesterlea any more.

She laughed, ran nimbly down where he had slipped and slithered, and came into his offered arms as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He had kissed girls before, but never had it been like this. Unsteady, breathless and struggling for calm, he pushed her gently away, angry at his own embarrassment.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I shouldn't have done that.'

She looked puzzled and pleased all in one. 'Nice!' she said firmly. 'I like that. Again!' But he shook his head.

'Not now. Come on, we have other things to do.' He led her around the car, opened the door, saw her settled bouncingly in the seat, and got in the other side, still in some confusion. Once, long ago, he had rashly gulped a double whisky on an empty stomach. This feeling was highly similar. He let off the hand-brake and started down the road again, cautiously, trying to avoid the worst of the pot-holes. By his side she was all wide-eyed excitement and curiosity, until she realised where they were headed, then that shivering, mindless terror came back, washing over him like a soundless scream. It was like sitting beside a caged and frantic animal, frightened and cowering from something it didn't understand. And there was something Collier didn't understand, either. All his boyhood had been spent here, and he had been back more than once as an adult. For him, with his particular talent, Chesterlea was more than just the place, with sight, sound and smell. It was also a feel. There should have been the distant thought-mumble, like the hushed roar of surf on a beach, growing stronger with nearness. He knew every inch of this road. By

now he should have been hearing the 'life' of the place. Instead there was nothing, nothing at all.

As Mary Ellen had said, they were all gone away. Or dead. There was a silence that was shocking to him, against which her bubbling terror stood out all the more vividly. There came a steep straight stretch, a sharp right-hand turn at the bottom. The trees fell away. There was the village, full in the mid-morning sun, some fifty or so old houses ranged along either side of the chuckling Lea. And Collier choked on an oath, clamped on his brakes, and stared, sweat breaking out on his face. Because everything was as serene and normal as it could be. He had arrived just in time to see three latecomers mount the church steps and disappear into the dark interior. He would have sworn they were Mrs. Robinson, Mrs. Mumford and her sister, Miss Collins. There was old Jack Atkinson, sitting dozing on his low stool by his half-open front door, with Sam, his aged and near-blind bulldog, sprawled at his feet. And there, too, was Granny Parry in her little patch of front garden, snipping away at her hedge, as she had done every fine Sunday morning as far back as he could remember. All was as normal, natural and Sunday-perfect as the sunshine which lit and warmed them all.

But for Collier, gifted or cursed with an extra sense, this was the total opposite of normality, was so utterly impossible that his mind circled on itself in panic, trying to find some end to catch hold of. With his eyes shut he would have sworn there wasn't a living person within a mile, except the terrified girl by his side. With his eyes open he stared at utter insanity, at Chesterlea going about its usual Sunday business . . . on a Tuesday! In sudden sympathy for Mary Ellen he put his arm around her and she snuggled wordlessly close.

'I know exactly how you feel,' he muttered. 'It scares the spit out of me, too. It's like watching TV with the sound turned off, only this is real . . . or I am stark, staring crackers.' He eased his foot off the brake, let the car run

slowly until they were abreast the garden where Granny Parry snipped away. He stopped the car and called out,

'Good morning to you, Gran!'

The grey-haired old lady went snipping on methodically, paying not the slightest heed. He took an unsteady breath, nerved himself against the ice-water fear that trickled down his spine, got out of the car, went to her garden gate, clicked it open, moved to stand by her side. And now he could 'hear' something from her mind, a strange click-click-rattle noise like nothing he had ever met before. It was, he thought with a shudder, the kind of sound a machine might make, if it could think. But it seemed to come from her.

'Morning, Gran!' he said again, loudly, defiantly. He might as well not have been there for all the notice she took. His feet wanted to turn and run. He had to command his hand and arm to reach out and touch her sleeve, to catch, and tug. And tug harder, until she staggered a little and turned towards him, the shears still going snip-snip in mid-air, her eyes staring blankly forward. Like an animate doll. He drove himself to crane and peer full into her old and many-wrinkled face, her faded grey eyes. Not by so much as a flicker or hint of expression did she acknowledge his presence. From her mind came that obscene click-rattle, louder now. The shears in her withered old hands snipped steadily away within dangerous inches of his coat. He withdrew his grasp, shivering, and she swung back, back to her hedge, back to her trimming.

He shambled back to the car, to slump behind the wheel, breathing hard. That meaningless rattle was terrifying. He had listened to minds that were drunk, or unconscious; twice to the insane, and once, even, to a mind fading slowly away and becoming silent in death. But he had never before heard anything like that hideous rattle. Now that he was aware of it, he could hear it from old Jack, across the way, and, faint with distance, from many others. He had neither the need nor the courage to check any further. He knew he would get that same awful rattle from everyone else in the

village. But what did it mean? Mary Ellen shivered close to him, pathetic in her complete trust in his wisdom.

'What the hell do I do now?' he asked her, expecting neither a reply nor that she would understand, but simply for the reassurance of his own voice. 'What *can* I do? If I go back to Davie Dodds and tell him about this ... He'll have me put away! Besides, suppose I did go back, what would I tell him? They *look* all right. How could I explain that I know they aren't?' For it was lifelong habit, ever since the strange faculty of his had come on him at puberty, not to try to explain to anyone just how different he was. Not to anyone, not ever. 'All the same, though, somebody's got to do something, if it's only to find out what's happened to all these poor people. Are they all sick, bewitched, poisoned, or what?'

Mary Ellen wriggled closer; but said nothing.

'Damned if I ever heard of a disease or plague anything like this, at all. A doctor might know, though. Good God! The doctor! I'd forgotten all about him.' He sat up urgently, reached for the starter, and Mary Ellen looked at him in quick curiosity.

'Doctor?' she said. 'Can he fix'm?'

'I very much doubt it, somehow.' Collier had none of the average layman's awe of the medical profession. He was in a unique position to know only too well just what went on under their façade of all-knowledge. 'But at least he ought to know what to do, who to get in touch with. To get the whole thing off my back.' He hesitated. The same problem would come up. How to explain? But it wanted only for the learned man to step outside his laboratory long enough to see for himself. That should do it, all right. He made a smile for Mary Ellen.

'You're an odd one, though, aren't you? You knew all about this. Some sort of instinct, I imagine. I don't wonder you were scared.' He put out his hand to pat her in reassurance and his palm fell on the silky smooth warmth of her naked thigh where her dress was split. The tingle made him snatch his hand away as if he had touched some-

thing hot. He saw now that her ragged dress was split entirely up one side, perilously held in one place by a large safety-pin. And that she had nothing at all on underneath.

'Nice!' she said, with that white smile of hers. 'Again?'

He put both hands carefully on the wheel, swallowed, sought for words as he carefully refrained from looking at her. 'I'm sorry,' he said, inadequately. 'I didn't mean to do that. Look, I have all the trouble I can handle, right now. Let's go find that doctor, shall we? The pit-head laboratory, Davie said.'

To reach it he had to drive the length of the village street and across the old stone bridge, then back up the other side of the Lea. Pushing away the innocently primitive warmth from Mary Ellen left a vacuum into which the chill horror of the 'dead' village flooded freely. Forced to fight on two fronts, he began to feel stretched. The Mini bumbled over the hump-back of the bridge and bore sharp right, passing the old abandoned drift-mouth of the mine. A dark and forbidding gap straight into the hillside, it had been boarded up so long ago that several of the old timbers had rotted loose, leaving gaps where an agile body might squirm through. He had heard rumours that Mary Ellen took refuge there sometimes, when the weather was very bad. He eyed it as they passed, and decided it would be a very hard day indeed when he would take shelter in a place like that. He snatched a sideways glance at her. No wonder she was so filthy. But it was all on the surface. As his Aunt Maud would say: 'Nothing that soap and water won't cure.' The glance was unwise. He saw the neatness of her hip, the first soft swell of a mature breast, and went warm as he stared forward once more.

Then a stream of thought, new and strange, impinged on his mind and took all his attention. A man's thought, a man in the grip of some strong and exhilarating excitement, it was all in a jumble, as thought-streams usually were, with occasional phrases bubbling to the surface.

Chance ... of course ... sheer good luck ... the right man in the right place at the right time ... happened to

Fleming, didn't it? Got something positive, sure about that. Damn that broken flask. Have to do it all over again. But something. A positive reaction . . . no doubt at all . . .

The old pit-head laboratory building was in sight now, its red bricks weather-stained and grimy, the stolid square windows thick with dust. As he reduced speed the stream of thought abruptly changed.

'A car? Who in blazes can be driving a car, here? Stopped, now. Can't be coming here, surely? Damned interference . . . who can it be?'

Collier climbed out, offered his hand to Mary Ellen, who hung back timidly. 'Come on,' he said, gently. 'It's all right. No need to be frightened here. You're quite safe with me, you know.'

'Yes, I know,' she said, and smiled dazzlingly, enough to make his head pound for a moment. Damn it, he thought, you have to be careful what you say to a simple soul like her. She accepted his hand, came leggily out, and he led her to the dingy old door, rapped firmly on it.

'Doctor Parker?' he said, to the small, red-faced man in glasses who opened the door to them. 'My name is Gordon Collier, of the Stanfield *Weekly News*. I do hope I'm not interrupting you in the middle of anything critical.'

'Well, I'm blowed!' Parker took off his glasses, to tap them against his thigh under a grubby white dust-coat. 'A newspaper reporter in this forsaken back-of-beyond? What do you expect to get out of me, eh?'

'Some help, to start with.'

'Oh!' Parker looked up at him, then at Mary Ellen. 'I'm not that kind of a doctor. Not a G.P. No authority. Unless it's some kind of emergency . . .? Who's she?'

'You could call her the village idiot, if you were that way inclined. I came across her on the way here and she appeared to be in considerable distress, so I brought her along.'

'I see.' Parker replaced his glasses, eyed Mary Ellen up and down, and shook his head. 'She could do with a hot bath and some decent clothes, but she looks otherwise fit

and healthy to me. And retarded minds are hardly in my field, I'm sorry.'

'Me too.' Collier made himself be patient. 'Look, I'm doing this all wrong. I came over from Stanfield this morning to see you and get some kind of story from you, but something's gone wrong on the way. Something in the village out there, and it's not going to be easy to explain. D'you mind if we come in for a minute or two?'

'Eh? Oh, all right, I suppose, so long as the young lady isn't afraid of rats.'

'Rats? I shouldn't think so. She has the name for being very good with animals of all kinds.' Following Parker, he led Mary Ellen into a long, low, barn-like room full of scuffling and squeaking. Banks of cages filled the whole of one wall. Down the middle of the floor long benches had been set end-to-end and were littered with apparatus. There were tubes and bottles, dishes and flasks, balances, and a square-bodied machine that hummed and clicked away to itself over some abstruse performance or other. There was an overall smell that had fur in it, and hints of ammonia.

'It's a bit of a shambles,' Parker apologised. 'I can't offer you a seat. There's only the one, and I suppose we'd better reserve that for the lady ...' but Mary Ellen wasn't interested in sitting. She was off along the array of cages, slowly and curiously, peering into each one until she got to the far end, then retraced her steps to a group of three near the middle. Watching, Collier was caught by the tension in her attitude. Parker made as if to move; but Collier caught at his arm.

'Hold on a minute,' he cautioned quietly. 'She may have found something. She's a sensitive, you know what I mean? It was she who spotted the trouble in the village, too. Let's see what she's found.' They went to join her. She looked to Collier in visible dread.

'All dead in this one,' she said. 'Just like the people. All dead.' He stared, puzzled, at the lively little beasts. Then, on a hunch, he put his head close to this bank of cages. Little currents of life-force were threading the air all around him,

but here, just here ... these three cages ... there it was again ... that awful clicking rattle. Feeling sick, he stared at these rats. So far as he could see with the eye they were no different from all the rest. He turned to Parker, and saw suppressed fury on the doctor's face.

'What the devil made you pick those cages, eh?' Parker demanded. 'How could you tell?'

'Tell what?' Collier challenged. 'Is there something wrong with these particular rats?'

Parker took off his glasses again, slowly, stood twirling them and staring from one to the other of his unexpected guests.

'Just who the hell are you anyway, Collier? Excuse me for being unduly suspicious, but I've had more than my fair share of cranks, spies and snoops, and your appearance here, just at this time, seems something more than just a bloody coincidence. What exactly are you after? Just how much do you know?'

Collier thought fast, desperately. There had to be some way to get out of this corner, to make this man talk without giving away his own oddity.

'They're all dead,' Mary Ellen said again. 'Just like the people.'

'There, you heard what she said?' Collier snatched at the opening. 'I don't know how she knows; but she does. There's something wrong with those rats. They look all right to you, to me, but there's something different about them. What? You know, and you'd better tell me. It could be important.'

'Important?' Parker made it a sneer. 'If you only knew! For years medicine has been chasing a cure for cancer, a general one, not a snivelling little specific but something that will stop it flat. And I think I've got it, like that!' He gestured with a finger and thumb close together. 'So simple, if I'm right. And you say it could be important, hah!'

'But what?' Collier demanded. 'Just what does it do?'

'Well ...' Parker shook his head slowly, '... to put it in terms you might be able to understand, and without giving

away any technical angles ... you know, I hope, that a cancerous cell actually isn't any different from an ordinary one except that it's anarchic, it runs wild in the system, forms its own communities, doesn't obey any of the rules ... anyway ... I happened on a culture. In some ways it acts like a fungus, in others like a mould. Curious stuff. It may even be a virus. But it has exactly the opposite effect. All cells grow, develop and change, the good ones in accordance with the organised system, the cancer ones, as I say, just run wild. But my culture halts them all dead in their tracks. They don't develop, they don't change, they just stay put. It's weird. I can't explain it yet, but I will.'

His voice and manner took on the irrational air of the dedicated fanatic. Collier listened in growing unease. 'I had a flask of the serum, and two score rats as test. Some were clone whites, some were wild ones I trapped in the mine for control and comparison. These are all that are left of my test batch. They don't get any older, Collier. They don't change, at all! Even their visible behaviour is odd. Repetitious. Cyclic. As if they were stuck in a groove. It is quite remarkable. I've never seen anything like it. And that, whether you like it or not, is all I'm going to tell you!'

'Oh no it isn't!' Collier spoke with sudden angry conviction. 'You just listen to me for a moment!' Parker backed away to the bench, looking apprehensive. 'I'm no scientist but I'm reasonably well-informed on the broader issues. It's part of my job. I'm going to suggest to you that your damned serum, mould or fungus or whatever it is, has somehow interfered with the biological clock in those rats. It's their twenty-four hour rhythm that's stuck in a groove. No, just wait a moment,' as Parker began to smile derisively. 'We have just come in through the village. Whatever is wrong with those blasted mice of yours is also wrong with those people out there. You needn't take my word for it, come and see what we saw ... and wonder if you're going mad. I know those old people well. They are

going through the motions of living, just like robots. They don't hear when you speak. They don't answer. There ... hear that? That's the church bell. For those people out there ... it's Sunday. Still! We know that it's Tuesday, Parker, don't we? But for them this is their third Sunday in a row. Are you going to try to tell me that is not your bloody culture, got loose somehow?'

But Parker wasn't going to do anything like that. His ruddy face had gone greenly pale. 'Sunday?' he echoed weakly. 'My flask ... the culture ... I dropped and broke it ... Saturday afternoon. All I had left ...'

'How? Where?'

'There, in the sink. I flushed it away down the drain, of course.'

'Drain?' Collier was struck by a terrible thought. 'You've run it into the burn, you bloody idiot. The Lea. The river! Everyone in the village uses it, they always have. It's the sweetest water in a hundred miles!'

'God!' Parker struck himself on the brow. 'How the hell was I supposed to know that? I'm used to working in civilised terms, with drains and sewage. This place *was* a laboratory, before. Surely *they* didn't shoot their washings into the burn?'

'That's a point!' Collier wheeled and ran outside, sharp right and on down to the water's edge, Parker pounding at his heels. 'There's your answer,' he pointed. 'There was a pipe-line there to carry it along to the far side of the bridge, but it's rusted away, long ago, see?'

'Why the far side of the bridge?'

'Because that's where the mine effluent comes out. Mucky yellow stuff, full of sulphur and iron oxides, what we used to call "cankery water" when I was a kid.'

Parker was staring now, away along the purling water to the bridge. 'Is there any effluent still running from the mine, d'you know? What's the 'pH' of it, if any?'

'How the hell would I know?' Collier demanded; but he spoke to Parker's back, as the doctor went haring back into the lab, almost bowling Mary Ellen over in his haste.

Seconds later he was out again, still on the run, with a couple of test-tubes in one hand and a small wadge of coloured paper in the other. Collier ran after him along the river bank.

'What are you up to now?' he cried.

'Check that effluent. Pray that it's acid ... else that damned culture could be all over the lower valley by now. Three days!'

Mary Ellen ran too, spurning the ground with no apparent effort. 'They aren't dead, after all?'

'Not yet anyway. Just going around in circles. Mary Ellen!' Collier was so surprised that he almost missed his footing. 'Did you understand all that we were saying?'

'Oh yes,' she said, and he returned his attention forward; but to himself he said: 'The devil you did. And I thought you were simple!'

On ahead, Parker ran straight into the water under the bridge, heedless of shoes and trousers legs. Collier was content to halt and crouch and peer. The big open-ended pipe still ran scummy yellow, although considerably reduced in quantity from what he remembered. After a minute or two Parker came squishily back, breathing hard but looking relieved.

'That's all right,' he panted. 'Acid as hell. The culture never got past this point, at any rate.' He dropped to squat on the grass, and Collier settled beside him, still anxious.

'Now what?' he wondered. 'Do you have an antidote?'

'Spoken like a true layman!' Parker snorted. 'Antidote? Man, I don't know what the stuff is, yet. That's partly what I came here to find out. Still, it's not too serious. All my test animals have eliminated the stuff totally in around seventy-two hours.'

'That's something,' Collier said. 'But these people are going to need help, assistance against after-effects, shock, whatever. They are all old folk, remember, it could upset them quite a bit.'

'Right.' Parker agreed sadly. 'You're quite right. I shall have to report this to my superiors, lay on help, expert

assistance and plenty of it. And there could be a devil of a stink . . . or what you'd call a scoop!'

'I am a reporter. But there are ways . . . and ways . . . of writing up a story. It could be the account of a small and minor epidemic in a tiny village, with the prompt and intelligent intervention of a doctor who just happened to be there and knew what to do, thus averting what might have been a big tragedy. Something like that. Why would I want to interfere with what you are trying to do, so long as you remember me, if and when you make your big discovery? Point is now, is there anything I can do to help?'

'Not really. I've my car. It won't take long to nip down to Danchester and sound the alarm, discreetly. I'm known there. I'd better get on with that.' He offered his hand. 'See you again sometime, Collier, when I've something more positive to show. I'm glad you came by.' He nodded briefly to Mary Ellen and strode off along the river-bank, leaving a trail of wet shoe-prints.

Collied sighed, turned to Mary Ellen, and realised he had another and different kind of problem. What was he to do about her? Quite suddenly she had become important to him. He couldn't just leave her here. But . . . his Aunt Maud was all the kin he had in all the world. Elderly, liking to give the impression of being a dragon, she was really a very nice, sweet old lady underneath, but he could just imagine her reaction if he presented Mary Ellen to her just as she was at this moment. He chuckled inwardly. Mary Ellen laughed, put her hand on his arm.

'Bath,' she said. 'Warm water and soap. Clean dress, brush my hair . . . you can show me all these things. Then . . . Aunt Maud . . . will like me?'

It was like being plunged bodily into a hot bath. The blood pounded in his ears and he had to strain for a steady breath as he stared into her merry blue eyes, and understood. The answer was so obvious, so right, that it seemed to hit him from all directions at once. This was how she had known about the village people *and* the rats. She had his talent. Years ago he had given up all hope of meeting

someone like himself, and now here she was. No wonder she was 'odd' and alone, and wild. He had only to recall his own torment and fear when he discovered all minds were open to him to listen to; but not one to whom he could speak. It must have been a thousand times worse for her, all alone.

'Not all alone now,' she said, gently, and her fingers found their way into his grasp, to be held tightly.

'That's right,' he said. 'Nor me, not any more!'

THE GREEN FUSE

by

MARTIN I. RICKETTS

Martin Ricketts, whose first story for New Writings in SF, *NEW CANUTE, appearing in Volume 24, presented a memorable approach to the theme of time displacement, writes of his new story herewith that it deals with difficulties of communication between different species of sentient beings, the place of religion in the future, the bounds of biological possibility, of selfishness and self-sacrifice, and adds: 'But when it comes right down to it, this is mainly about three people, two humans and an alien.' THE GREEN FUSE also contains a line of dialogue which at the time of my writing this introduction is of agonising consequence, but which, I hope and trust, by the time of publication will be merely history.*

THE GREEN FUSE

ONE

AS THE coffin hit the water Maria began to cry. I put my arm around her but could think of nothing to say that I hadn't said already. Her moist eyes looked at me, silently appreciating my lame attempt to give her some sort of comfort.

The little wooden box swung out into the current and sank in a swirl of bubbles. The ripples were carried away and the water became smooth once more, the reflection of the orange sky across its surface making it shine like a river of molten brass.

This water burial, of course, was only a ceremony. Later, after the coffin had been swept downstream to the Pool of Transference, the Priest Chiefs would send someone to dive in after it and break it open so that Kanlin's body could sink into the mud at the bottom of the pool.

We watched the place where the coffin had vanished, then turned and walked back towards the village. Kordalia, the head Priest Chief, watched us uncertainly.

'I am sorry,' he said as we approached. 'Mrs. Haines was very close to the young Kanlin. My sympathy is unboundless.' He danced in front of us as if in agitation, the five coloured ribbons of rank that were looped around his neck flying with the movement like the tattered remnants of an old harlequin costume. Hardly more than five feet tall, Kordalia was pink-skinned and bald. His double-elbowed arms hung from sagging shoulders and almost touched the ground, the fingers of each of his hands fanning out like prehensile needles. Despite my sadness I still felt vaguely

amused by the constant grammatical errors of his speech. The first human visitors to this world—the anthro-ecologists—had learned the Lanaian language and in return had taught many of the Lanaian leaders Earthian. But there were many subtleties, many differences of meaning between our two tongues for which there were no literal translations, and it would take years before we could speak their language properly, or they ours. Kordalia, though, had proved himself adept at picking up the language of man, and despite the manifold difficulties involved in teaching an alien our tongue, his Earthian was becoming increasingly fluent and errorless day by day.

'Thank you, Kordalia,' I said, trying to keep my voice calm as he danced awkwardly before us, an unintentionally macabre clown. He threw his arms in the air.in the Lanaian gesture of sympathy. Bravely Maria forced a smile for him. Satisfied, he turned and began to waddle rapidly along the path that led back to the village.

At the edge of the village, against a background of squat wooden huts, a circle of Lanaian women watched us in sympathetic silence. To one side another circle of women danced the Dance of Transference, jumping and twisting in the dust, and waving colourful leaves like flat swords around their thin bobbing heads.

We nodded our acknowledgement, then entered our own hut. Here, in the relative quiet, Maria broke down again. She collapsed on to the bed, tears streaming down her beautiful face. I sat beside her and let her lean against me, my fingers stroking her ash-blonde hair. There was nothing I could do. Helplessly I looked out of the window and watched the evening sunlight strike across the low rooftops of the village in flashes of turquoise and gold.

Two

WE HAD first arrived on Lanaia three years earlier. Two strangers sent by the government of Earth. Two strangers, from a culture that had swung wildly away from the

church and then, just as wildly, had swung back again. Earth: a deeply religious world since the beginning of the twenty-second century. A planet with a church-oriented government. A planet in control of a vast sector of the galaxy. And in that sector, hundreds of planets with backward cultures, cultures that had never heard the word of God, cultures that had to be taught the meaning of Christianity. And here we came, a missionary and his wife, to learn all we could of the Lanaian customs and superstitions.

We were the second phase in the Earthisation of these people. Whenever a new inhabited world is discovered the anthro-ecologists are the first humans to land and make contact with the dominant sentient species. Their job is to establish friendly relations with the natives and to gather as much data as possible. Also, if possible, they are to teach a number of the natives our language, or failing that, learn theirs. Then they are to leave the planet altogether.

Phase two begins with the Interplanetary Christian Mission: a missionary couple is sent to live among the natives. Here on Lanaia, needless to say, that couple was Maria and myself. Later, after we had completed our tour here, Phase three would be implemented, which would entail church-building and preaching on a relatively large scale. In theory these secondary phases sounded easy; but in fact it often took years of banging one's head against a brick wall before there even began to be any results at all. Frequently, one had to deal with violence in many forms. But here on Lanaia we were lucky: the natives were an amazingly peaceful race who did not quarrel among themshelves.

When we first arrived, Maria and I were little more than curiosities: thin, frail, pale-skinned creatures from an incredibly far-away place. Gradually the Lanaians came to accept us, and eventually even came to regard us as their friends. The knowledge we brought was new to them too, and they seemed surprisingly eager to learn of the nature

of space and of all the other worlds that were spread like motes across the sprawling empire of Earth.

Although our job was not to preach religion to these people, we did make Christianity known to them. We laid down its principles plainly before those who cared to listen, and we exemplified it as much as possible in our daily routines. In fact we were cutting the ice for the third phase which would begin within two or three years. Eventually, to our surprise, even some of the old dogmatic Priest Chiefs came to listen to what we had to say.

And we, in turn, studied their religion with interest.

It was simple enough. The leaders of the village were very old men who did not preach to their fellows, but merely advised and gave council whenever it was required of them. Despite the apparent looseness of this relationship, there seemed to be an odd indivisible bond between the Priest Chiefs and the rest of the village, a sort of mutual need and interdependence. I knew Maria sensed it as well as I, yet neither of us mentioned it, for it was as inexplicably alien as it was unmistakable. The Priest Chief's one tangible duty, as far as we could see, was to safeguard the ancient 'Scroll of Priests' which was kept housed in a large building at the edge of the village. The priests all lived together in this one hut, and never at any time was the scroll left unguarded.

We had been on Lanaia a little more than a year before we were eventually allowed to see the scroll. Kordalia took us into the gloom of the priest-hut immediately after listening to our discussion of the Ten Commandments.

'The Scroll of Priests is very ancient,' he told us. 'Possibly there was a Lanaian equivalent of your Moses, and perhaps it was delivered to him in a similar manner as the tablets, but that I cannot say; its origin is lost in our history. It is, however, still read and committed to memory by every one of our people. Once learned, it is never forgotten.'

He leaned forward between a pair of crude wooden bunks and lifted a curtain from a curious crib-like table. The scroll nestled inside. It was a thin slice of wood,

yellowed and worn, and obviously very old. But the peculiar Lanaian script was surprisingly clear. Together Maria and I read it through, translating with difficulty:

'And at the height of the season of warm the women shall journey to the Valley of Crimson, there to receive the seed and conceive of offspring. Daughters of plenty shall be born from all, sons of life from but a few. The sons of life, having sprung from seed shall be seed. They shall consume each other and all the senses of the soil, of water, and of the atmosphere. They shall consume the ones who bore them and these shall be sacred. The daughters of plenty shall thrive until the time of womanhood. Thus shall life renew itself and existence remain constant.'

We stood there and said nothing. After a moment I read it through again, then looked at Maria. Her expression told me she didn't understand it either. Suddenly we felt like intruders. Kordalia must have sensed how we felt, for he smiled at us then, his large nigrescent eyes shining, and led us from the building.

It wasn't until much later that I came to realise that it was only the nuances, the slight untranslatable differences between our two tongues that made these writings so cryptic and puzzling; in fact the scroll gave us our first clue of what was later to happen. Though, of course, there could never have been any warning for the parts Maria and I were to play in subsequent events.

Three

We had been on Lanaia a little under two years when Maria first voiced her uneasiness.

'Have you noticed, Jim,' she said across the flat trunk of wood on which we took our meals, 'how the male children don't seem to grow?'

'How do you mean?'

'Take Kanlin, for instance. He was one year old when

we first arrived and now, two years later, he's no bigger than he was then. And he's still being suckled by his mother ...'

I shook my head. 'Maria, this planet's yearly cycle is equal to five of Earth's. How do you know these people haven't got a life-cycle correspondingly longer than ours. Don't forget they're alien, totally different from——'

She cut me off. 'Jim! The anthro-ecologists' report told us everything we needed to know about these people—or so we thought. We know that only females, children and very old men live here in the village, that the majority of the males stay throughout their lives in a place some way south of here called the Valley of Crimson—a place that no human has yet been allowed to visit. We know that each generation of females has to travel to this valley before they can conceive. We know the routine of their lives: how they breathe, what they eat, what makes them laugh or cry. But nowhere in the report does it say what happens when the children get older, about how *fast* they mature ...'

'But, darling, the anthro-ecologists were here for only a limited period of time. They collected all the data they considered necessary and then left.' I smiled. 'You couldn't seriously expect them to stay here indefinitely just to watch the children grow!'

'Oh, Jim!' She sat back, frowning with annoyance. 'Are you blind? Can't you see how only the *female* children have grown during the time we've been here?' She stood up suddenly. 'Come here and take a look——' She walked over to the window. Reluctantly I rose and followed her.

'There!' I gazed to where she pointed across the open space that separated the Lanaian huts from our own. Sitting with their backs against one of the huts, eyes closed against the glare of the sun, were two Lanaian women. At their feet their children played in the dust. The children were both the same age, yet the girl was almost twice the size of the boy; she drew childish pictures in the dust with a length of stick, and at times would look

up at her mother and smile. In contrast Kanlin, the other child, sat dumbly still, contemplating his toes with babyish concentration.

I looked at Maria and shrugged. 'So the girls develop faster than the boys. What's there to get all worked up about?'

Her lips tightened and she glared at me in irritation. 'Oh, Jim, the girls *don't* develop faster than the boys, that's just it. *The boys don't develop at all!*'

'Now, look——'

'And there's something else. There are almost as many girls as there are adult females in this village. How come there are only nineteen boys?'

I stopped dead. A thought clicked into place; the same thought that Maria had obviously been thinking for a long time.

I said, 'You think the boys are—you think they're somehow *different*?'

She nodded slowly. 'The male Lanaians live in this mysterious Valley of Crimson, don't they? The females conceive in the valley, but the children are born in the villages. Maybe the male children are taken to the valley not long after they are born, while the female children stay behind with their mothers . . .'

'And you think that these nineteen boys were not taken to the valley because . . .'

'Yes, because they are retarded in some way; either physically or mentally—or perhaps both!'

Four

Two days later I tried to prise some answers out of Kordalia.

'Why are the boys of the village not in the Valley of Crimson?'

Kordalia looked surprised. He blinked.

'Boys?'

I sighed with irritation; again the differences of lan-

guage that had been too subtle for the anthro-ecologists' inadequate translation computor seemed to be setting up their imperceptible barrier.

'The boys,' I repeated. 'There are many daughters here in the village; why are there only nineteen sons? Are they . . .' I fumbled, avoiding the word 'retarded', searching for a tactful euphemism '. . . different?'

Kordalia's frown vanished and he smiled. He suddenly realised what I was trying to say. 'Yes.' He nodded. 'Yes, they are different. We call them the Chosen Ones.'

I smiled back at him. The Lanaians, it seemed, had euphemisms too. It wasn't until almost a year later that I was to realise what a monumental misunderstanding it was.

A month later the first of the nineteen male children died. The subsequent water burial was the first of many that Maria and I were to witness. Sadly we watched the colourful ceremonial dances: the Dance of Death, the Dance of the Water Mother and the Dance of Transference. It was all very beautiful and very moving.

But the mourning lasted for only a short while. Next day, much to our surprise, the Lanaians were cheerfully applying themselves once more to their various chores. And when, less than a week later, the second boy died there was again a day full of ceremony and again, surprisingly, the mourning lasted for no more than that day.

After the fifth death Maria and I began to feel more than a little uneasy. The Lanaians were taking it all too coolly, as if these boys dying like flies was the most natural thing in the world.

Over the next few days, too, my conviction that the Lanaians came to my debates entirely through an eagerness to learn began to dissipate. A subtle change had come over the village. Now I became certain that they came to the hut that I had somewhat sardonically christened the 'Schoolhouse' merely out of curiosity or politeness. They sat and watched me with their dark empty eyes and I

knew they weren't taking the least interest in my words; I might as well have been talking to a congregation of baboons. Yet I carried on as I knew I was obliged to do, consoling myself with the thought that perhaps it was only my uneasiness that made me feel as I did. Maybe, after all, this shifting of attitude was only in my mind . . .

It was while I was conducting one of these increasingly languid discussions that the *bannalia* attack came.

Imagine a wolf and imagine a large vulture-clawed bat. Put them both together in one composite creature and you'll have some idea of what the *bannalia* look like. The anthro-ecologists' report had mentioned them. They live in the mountains to the far north and are the Lanaians only real enemy. They are vicious and utterly ruthless. They attack seldom but always in packs, searching the villages for any unattended Lanaian young, and on that day they came suddenly and quickly.

I was finishing my opening speech when a shout of warning came from outside. Puzzled, I went to the window. Everywhere Lanaian females were running across the dust, snatching their offspring from the ground and carrying them into the safety of the huts. A shadow suddenly obscured the sun and I looked up—and there they were, high above the village, hundreds of *bannalia* circling like a pack of huge predatory locusts.

My congregation were already making for the doors. In rising panic I followed them out. Once a *bannalia* attack has begun you don't stand a chance: they fall like bombs and you never hear them until their vast powerful wings cleave the air like scythes above your head. I broke into a run. All around, screaming Lanaians were running across the clearing kicking the dust into palls. But there was just one thought on my mind: I had to find Maria.

I was halfway across the village when they came. With a scream the whole pack fell, swooping and diving across the huts like monstrous pterodactyls. By some miracle I reached our hut unscathed. I saw Maria in the doorway and sagged with relief. I bundled her inside. Heaving my

equipment case from under the bunk, I grabbed my flare pistol and ran out into the clearing.

Everywhere the whirling air was filled with the beat, slash and hiss of wing and claw. I fell back against the wall of the hut. Flying dust stung my eyes and I hardly knew what I was doing as, lifting the pistol, I fired.

A star shell moves very, very slowly. It moves slowly enough for a man to duck if he sees one coming. Sometimes, when you want one to move especially fast, it seems trapped forever in an interminable sequence of slow-motion film. That was how this one moved. It lazed gracefully up in the air among the hurtling *bannalia*, reached the top of its parabola and hung there as if it were never going to come down and for a moment, for a gut-churning moment of despair, I thought it wasn't going to catch.

And then suddenly it burst. With a tremendous roar it exploded outwards in a vast sheet of sizzling yellow flame that in a moment became a glaring disc of fire whose hard white frozen centre was too bright to look at. As one, the whole *bannalia* pack shrieked and rose above it in terror.

The flare continued to burn and expand, blazing for what seemed an eternity, and then, as the flames slowly began to shrivel and the glare became less intense, I could see that the *bannalia* were now circling even higher. Like clumsy bulbous kites they were drifting away on the wind above the village, gliding back towards the mountains of the north and leaving silence to settle slowly with the dust. Silence, save for a lone child's voice.

In ones and twos Lanaians emerged from their huts. Like apprehensive sheep they gazed nervously into the sky as if in doubt that the attack could have ended so abruptly. And there, sitting alone in the middle of the clearing, was Kanlin. He chortled happily to himself as, nearby, one long pink arm stretching out towards him as if to offer protection, sprawled his mother. She lay face downwards in the dust, a deep crimson pool spreading from beneath her and congealing slowly in the warm air.

The butt of the pistol suddenly felt hot in my hand. All

around me, one by one, Lanaians were gradually falling silent. Maria walked out from behind me and then stopped, staring at the body. There was a frozen moment of horror and disbelief; then she stepped forward across the dust.

Now everyone had forgotten the *bannalia*. I stared at the body, and then at the child. Maria looked up at me, all colour drained from her face, and knelt to lift the boy in her arms. He smiled uncomprehendingly as she cradled him to her.

Suddenly Kordalia was there. The crowd made way for him and he came bobbing through, then stopped when he saw what had happened. His eyes flicked from the body to the child and then to me. I could see then in his glance that he didn't want to believe it. It wasn't for this that he had become a Priest Chief. He stood deathly still for a moment as if hoping that it was all a mistake, praying that some *deus ex machina* would suddenly appear and put things right again. But finally, realising that this deliverance would never come, he shook his head.

'The mother is dead,' he announced quietly. 'Kanlin no longer has a mother. Therefore he no longer has a place in the Pool of Transference. Too bad.' He lifted his arms in the traditional gesture of sadness and then turned away quickly, ushering the other Lanaians back to their huts.

Maria started after him and then stopped. She looked at me uncertainly, the child cradled against her.

'Jim ...'

I shook my head and put my arm round her. There was nothing I could do. An odd, almost paradoxical Lanaian tradition declared that a child's body could not be committed to the Pool of Transference unless his mother was still living. Somehow, at that moment, inexplicably, the knowledge of this loss of Kanlin's filled me with infinitely more regret than the knowledge of his other loss.

Then suddenly Maria pulled away from me. She ran after Kordalia, calling out to him.

'Yes, Kordalia. Yes, he does have a mother. Me! *I* will be his mother!'

Kordalia turned. He stared at her incredulously.

'You? *You* will be his mother?' There was laughter in his voice.

'Yes.' She lifted her head. 'Yes, why not?'

Realising what she was trying to do, I stepped forward, taking her elbow. 'Yes, Kordalia, why not?' I said. 'Kanlin's mother has been killed; but there is no reason why Maria cannot take her place. On our world, if a child becomes an orphan, another home for him is found, other parents. He is not made an outcast. If Maria wants to be mother to this child, why not let her be? It is the good thing to do, the Christian thing. It is what God would *want* you to do . . .'

Kordalia frowned. 'How strange is your God.' He shook his head.

'Look, Kordalia,' I began; but he waved me to silence.

'All right,' he said. 'Mrs. Haines *shall* be Kanlin's new mother!'

He turned abruptly and walked away, dismissing the matter with a wave of his curiously jointed arms. For a moment Maria stared at me in surprise. Then she smiled happily and hugged the child to her.

I returned her smile uneasily.

'Come on,' I said. 'Let's take him home.'

Kanlin, like the other boys, was a sickly child. After the death of his mother, despite the intensive, almost desperate care that Maria lavished on him, his condition deteriorated rapidly. Ten months later he was the only one left of the nineteen boys.

Maria was heartbroken. Her love, I already knew, was too expansive for me alone—the childless emptiness of our marriage was what had eventually decided us to join the ICM—but here on Lanaia she had her own child at last. The tragedy was that we both knew he wouldn't be hers much longer.

All day she would croon to the boy, touch him and soothe him like some over-indulgent nanny. Each day his

condition grew worse, and each day the agony in her eyes was greater.

Then he died.

She took it even harder than I expected. Grief flared long and intensely inside her. She pined like a child, lacking almost completely the will to live. At one point I even thought she was contemplating suicide. But then gradually, several weeks later, her grief began to subside. Very slowly she came back to life.

Then I knew it was over. The price had been paid and it was great. Now Kanlin had his place in the Pool of Transference.

Five

Two months after Kanlin's funeral I walked out among the low hills a little way east of the village.

The life-ship was still there, just as we'd left it. Discreetly out of sight of the village, though not hidden, the little capsule was our only method of escape to the outside. It was standard ICM equipment—to be used only in an emergency. If we ever had to leave this place in a hurry this is what we would use. It had just enough fuel to carry us to the tiny mission satellite that orbited some five hundred miles above the surface of this planet. There we would set up a distress beacon, then wait for someone to come and fetch us.

I climbed up on to the metal cocoon, opened the hatch and dropped into the tiny cabin. I gave the control-console a cursory examination. Satisfied, I climbed out again, locked the hatch behind me and made my way back to the village.

A little later I put it to her.

'Why don't we leave here, Maria? They could replace us in no time at all.'

She frowned at me. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

'You need a holiday,' I insisted. 'We both do. A month or

two on a resort planet somewhere would do us the world of good.'

She looked at me as if she couldn't believe her ears. '*Leave* here ...? Jim, don't you realise we've got to *help* these people?'

'I know we have to try and teach them all sorts of ...'

'No, Jim.' She rose to her feet, walked over to the wall and then turned to face me. 'If the Lanaian men were here in this village instead of lazing in that valley of theirs they could have protected the women and children during that *bannalia* attack, couldn't they? Kanlin's mother need never have died ...'

'Perhaps. But you know there's nothing we can do.'

'Can't we?' She came forward and leaned on the table. '*Can't* we? Jim, I think we *can*! We can persuade them that the way they live is wrong, that it is wholly un-Christian. We can persuade them to believe that a man's place is with his wife and children. He must be their protector and provide for them. We must make them believe in the concept of a *united* family!'

'You realise that to do that would be to violate one of the basic rules of the ICM,' I warned. 'The time is not yet right for us to try and change their pattern of living. Later, when Phase Three begins——'

'Oh, *damn* Phase Three!' she exploded. 'Must we wait for *another* attack by those creatures, stand and watch while *more* women and children are attacked and killed ...?'

I stood up. 'Listen, Maria——' I said, then stopped as a look of intense pain flashed abruptly across her eyes. She took a step towards me and opened her mouth as if to call. I frowned. 'Maria?' Then suddenly she pitched forward unconscious into my arms. Fighting back the panic, I carried her across to the bunk and felt her forehead: her temperature was way up.

I felt dazed. What had happened? One minute I was talking to her and the next ... What was it? Something she had eaten, something alien? A disease ...?

I stumbled to the door. Kordalia would know! In rising hysteria I half-fell out into the bright sunlight and sprinted across the clearing towards his hut. Lanaians watched in puzzlement as I lurched to a halt in the doorway.

'Kordalia!'

His pink face emerged from the gloom. He looked puzzled. 'Mr. Haines . . .'

'My wife! She's ill! Quickly . . .'

He frowned at me for a moment, then a smile of understanding flickered across his face. He nodded slowly.

'Please do not worry,' he said, gently. 'It is *Rudash*, nothing more . . .'

'*Rudash?*' I stared at him.

'Young Kanlin was the nineteenth child whose passing is for *Rudash*.' He smiled and lifted his arms in the Lanaian gesture of happiness. 'The new generation is here . . .'

I reached out and grabbed him, tugged him savagely out into the sunlight. 'Don't just stand there spouting alien gibberish! Can't you understand? *My wife is ill!*'

'Mr. Haines . . .!'

'Kordalia, whatever's happening to my wife you seem to know something about it. You've got to *help* her!'

'No, Mr. Haines!' He protested as I dragged him across the clearing. 'She is not ill; it is merely *Rudash*.'

Around us a crowd of Lanaians was beginning to form. I swung Kordalia around and thrust my face close to his.

'Listen!' I seethed. 'My wife is lying there ill and all you do is speak words that I don't understand! Can't I get any sense out of you? What *is* this *Rudash*?'

Kordalia's dark eyes glanced past me, flicking around the faces watching us, then fastened again on mine.

'Please, Mr. Haines, your wife *asked* to be allowed to be Kanlin's mother . . .'

'Kanlin is dead!' I yelled. 'What has he got to do with my wife now? She collapsed just a moment ago. She's unconscious. Damn you, why won't you understand?'

The crowd was beginning to murmur now. I hardly heard them. Kordalia looked perplexed.

'Kanlin was the last one, therefore the season is complete,' he said. 'There are eighteen other women now in a similar coma to your wife's. They will remain in that state until Transference is complete. Now is the time of *Rudash*. Kanlin and the others are taking root at the bottom of the Pool——'

'Taking *root?*' I jumped backwards, stumbling against a solid wall of Lanaians. '*Taking root?*' I swayed. Several pairs of oddly jointed hands supported me. I stumbled forward again. Kordalia's bewildered eyes gleamed suddenly huge in front of me.

'A *metamorphosis?*' The hairs at the back of my neck began to prickle. 'You mean they're changing into *plants?*'

'Yes, Mr. Haines. They root in the sediment at the bottom of the pool. They link, all nineteen of them. Eventually they develop a collective consciousness that becomes powerful enough to include that of their mothers . . .'

'Kordalia, do you realise what you're saying, what you're expecting me to *believe?*'

'Mr. Haines, I know you may not be familiar with the Lanaian cycle of . . .'

'But Maria isn't a Lanaian!' I shouted. 'How can it happen to *her?*'

'Mr. Haines, I do not know. She had very much sympathy with the young Kanlin—they were very close. Perhaps sympathy became empathy, then perhaps something else again . . .'

'Maria!' I suddenly felt drunk. Turning quickly, I fell sprawling in the dust. I heaved myself upright again and ran back towards our hut. The crowd of Lanaians hastily made way for me, their large orb-like eyes watching me curiously.

Now I realised where I'd come across the word *Rudash* before—I'd read it on the Scroll of Priests.

She lay where I had left her. Her temperature had risen further. I knelt beside the bunk, grasped her shoulders and pressed my face close to hers. This couldn't be happening to her, not to my wife . . .

'The male children become plants,' I whispered, imploringly, oblivious now of the fact that she could neither hear nor see me. She gave no reaction and I jerked her upright, screaming: 'Wake up! It's not for you ... It's alien ... It'll kill you ...!' And then finally, realising the uselessness of what I was doing, I let her fall back on the pillow, my rage giving way to a feeling of intense, unbearable helplessness. I slumped down beside her on to the uneven floor, my emotional floodgates burst. Tears filling my eyes, I fell against the bunk and buried my face in my hands.

Six

THERE ARE some things over which a man has no control, moments in life when trip-wires of physiological change sweep under you and you either jump over them or fall flat. How long I lay there I don't know. But when I got to my feet it was dark and I realised I must have slept. And sleep, it seemed, had carried me safely over one of those trip-wires. Now my thoughts were crystal-clear. The Lanaians could do as they liked with each other and I would never interfere—but when it affected my wife it was more than I could be expected to endure. I looked down at Maria's deceptively peaceful face. Gone now was the anger and the self-pity; now I knew exactly what I had to do.

I went to the door of the hut and gazed out across the empty clearing to where Lanaia's single red moon shone high in the north. Nineteen male children died, I thought, and were buried in the Pool of Transference. But they did *not* die—it was something else, some kind of metamorphosis. They took root in the Pool, linking together, Kordalia had said. But how? It wasn't important. The fact remained that this phenomenon also somehow affected their mothers, sending them into some kind of deep comatic fever.

And Maria, although a foster mother, was one of these.

I went back inside, undressed and put on a pair of

shorts. I took a large knife from the equipment case, then went back out on to the clearing.

The air was cool against my skin as I moved across the village. The priest house was in total darkness as I crept around it. Once in the open I broke into a run and within a few minutes I was at the life-ship. I unlocked the hatch and dropped into the cabin. I opened the repair locker and took out my heavy rubber vacuum-torch. Then I detached the face-plate from my pressure suit, climbed back outside and relocked the hatch behind me.

To the west the village was still in darkness. I ran away from it, heading southwards. In less than a minute I was on the bank of the river.

I watched the smooth water sliding past my feet, scarlet reflections shimmering across its width like ghosts. The only sound was the soft hiss and lap of water in the reed beds.

I turned, moving quickly beside the river, following its course as it curved away to the south-east. When I was sure it was safe I switched on the torch.

At last the river widened, the flow of water slowing to accomodate the increased capacity of the Pool of Transference. I glanced quickly over my shoulder to make sure I wasn't being followed, then stepped off the bank.

The water was icy cold against my ankles. I waded forward and sank up to my knees. The mud sucked at the soles of my feet like glue. I swung the torch, its wide yellow beam probing into the depths of the pool. I took another step forward and sank up to my chest; already my legs were numb with the cold. I spat into the face-plate, rubbed the glass, then washed it out before putting it on. Without a helmet to hold it in place it was loose, but it would have to do. Then I pushed myself forward, took a lungful of air and dived below the surface.

The beam of the torch probed across the bottom, flashing and glinting against smooth round stones and dark clumps of weed. The mud sloped away to my left and I kicked

down, my ears starting to hum. There was no sign of what I was looking for.

I came up for air.

On my second dive I found the broken piece of coffin almost immediately. I kicked eagerly forward, swinging the torch from left to right. Then suddenly I saw all nineteen of them, all together in a wide half-circle, half-buried in the mud.

I saw Kanlin and almost gulped with horror. His skin was now a sickly translucent green and his fingers had somehow become elongated, thrusting down into the mud like emaciated worms. His eyes were closed, his mouth lolling open, tiny teeth glinting like diamonds in the wavering light.

I told myself there was no other way. A twinge of conscience swept through me and was gone. I had to save Maria. Despite my religious beliefs, despite my training, despite everything, Maria was all that really mattered to me.

I took the knife from my belt and hacked down. The blade cut through two of Kanlin's fingers and half a third. Eyes still closed, he instantly began to writhe as if in the grip of some insane nightmare. The others began to writhe too. I hacked at his left wrist, striking it four times before it was severed. Threads of dark oily liquid oozed from the wounds and billowed up through the water.

I came up for air, then dived again.

By now all nineteen of them were writhing frantically. I gripped Kanlin's shoulders and tried to pull him from the mud. He was stuck firm. I dug away around him with the knife, then pulled again. He moved slightly. I made another effort and suddenly he came—and so did the next child in line!

Their toes had grown in much the same way as their fingers, lengthening like roots and tangling together. In a frenzy of horror I realised that all nineteen of them were connected—if I pulled one from the mud they would all come. I dropped Kanlin and swam round the others.

Hardly knowing what I was doing, I slashed and hacked with the knife. I moved across the whole circle, stabbing from left to right, the water around me clouding with the dark viscous liquid. At last, lungs almost bursting, I thrust up to the surface.

Gulping air, I threshed to the bank and dragged myself out of the water and lay there for a long time on the soft wet grass, panting heavily and sobbing like a child.

SEVEN

I COULD hear the shrieks as I approached the village. Lanaians were running in all directions, calling frantically to one another like bewildered children. The priest house was ablaze with light.

A mob suddenly surged out of the village and rushed towards me, their eyes glittering in the light from their flaming torches. I stopped. I knew they were not given to violence; but still my hand went to the hilt of my knife. I was suddenly very frightened.

I saw Kordalia detach himself from the mob and hold up his hands. His accusing eyes held mine.

'You have committed murder.'

His tone was calm, almost matter of fact. I looked at him firmly.

'I had no choice; I did it for my wife.'

He shook his head. 'I recognise your values and they fill me with dismay. But perhaps you still do not understand. You have killed us . . . I believe your word for it is "genocide".'

I straightened, took a step forward. 'Now, look——'

He gazed at me sadly. 'No, you do *not* understand. But it is done, nothing anyone does will change it . . .'

I stared at him in surprise, then at all the others. Abruptly, my surprise turned to contempt. I had mur . . . yes, *murdered* nineteen of their kind, and they accepted it as if I had done nothing more than drown a sackful of

kittens. Suddenly I felt superior to these people. At that moment perhaps I even felt proud of myself.

I stepped forward and walked past them, heading towards the village. At the clearing I broke into a run.

Maria sat on the bunk, hands to her forehead. She looked as if she had awakened from nothing more than a few hours' sleep.

'Jim!' She gaped at me. 'You're dripping wet! What's happening?'

I knelt down and gripped her arms. 'They won't get you,' I whispered, smiling with relief. 'It's all right!'

She frowned. 'What in God's name are you talking about? What's going on?'

I lifted her to her feet. 'We're getting out of here. Now.' I took her hand and pulled her across the room. I ducked through the doorway. Outside I came face to face with Kordalia.

'If you wish to leave I cannot stop you,' he said, gently. 'But first you must understand that you have not murdered just nineteen of us; you have murdered *all* of us . . .'

Maria stared at me. She looked horrified. 'Murdered . . .?'

Kordalia ignored her. His flashing eyes lanced into mine.

'There will be no priests to guide the young ones,' he said. 'Left to fend for themselves, they will die in the winter or be taken by the *bannalia*.'

Belligerently, I returned his stare. 'You're talking rubbish . . .'

'No, Mr. Haines.' He gestured towards the other huts of the village. Faint screams drifted through the darkness. 'Can you not hear them? Those are the cries of the mothers of the other eighteen you killed. Their minds were half-occupied by the collective consciousness of their sons—now they are awakened, each with only half a mind, the other half filled with the pain and awareness of death. It is an agony that they will feel until they die also.'

'Jim!' Maria stared at me.

'But what about my wife, Kordalia?' I shouted. 'Why does *she* not suffer this agony you talk of?'

'Humans and Lanaians are not the same, Mr. Haines. You are alien to us and we are alien to you; there are many differences between us. Perhaps you cannot understand the cycle that our lives follow. But somehow Mrs. Haines fell into that cycle, slotted into a niche that had suddenly become available, and was swept up by it. She had great love for the young Kanlin: somehow her mind was held by that love, and perhaps that was the lever by which the Chosen Ones controlled her mind. But I am only guessing, Mr. Haines. Really it is no longer important ... You have broken that hold; now your wife is returned to you. You have succeeded in what you set out to do.'

I thrust my face towards his. 'Yes,' I snarled. 'I succeeded. And you stand there and whine about what will happen to the young ones ... Well, why don't you get your young *men* to come out from where they are hiding and take care of them?'

'Men?' Kordalia frowned. He seemed puzzled. 'There *are* no men. Surely you *know* ...'

'Jim! What's this all about?' Maria's eyes, wide and alarmed, flicked from one to the other of us.

'Know what?' I stared at Kordalia.

'Mr. Haines, you are unbelievably stupid,' he said. 'Our race is composed entirely of females; the only others are the sexless Chosen Ones who never grow biologically older after they are born, but are instead buried in the Pool of Transference ...'

'Entirely of females?' I snorted. 'Then what the hell are *you?*'

'Mr. Haines, I was once a mother to a Chosen One. There were twenty-one Chosen Ones in that generation, as there were nineteen in this. My child passed on and was buried in the Pool of Transference—and so were the other twenty. They linked, their dormant awarenesses mingled, became fused. Then that composite awareness entered my mind and the minds of the other mothers. We became comatic until the process was complete. Then we woke to a new life. As mothers we were finished, but our *minds* were now the

important thing. Our offspring had become one with nature, and we had become one with our offspring. We were no longer mothers; now we were the leaders of our people; we were the priests, we were the ones who would guide our people in the true cycle of . . .'

His voice trailed off as he realised I was laughing in spite of myself.

'Kordalia,' I said, 'are you trying to tell us you're a *female?*'

'No, Mr. Haines,' he said, evenly. 'Not any more. Once the process of *Rudash* was completed, my role as a mother was over; then I became what I am now—merely a sentient extension of nature itself. My *mind* was important, not my body. Gradually my breasts withered, my hair fell out and my voice became cracked and broken. I draped myself in the robes of priesthood and became what I am.'

'Then what *are* you people?' I asked him. 'Parthenogenetics—people with just o*ne* sex?'

'No, Mr. Haines.' He shook his head sadly as if he thought I never would understand and stood away from the door. Maria looked thunderstruck. For a moment I stood there in bewilderment. Then suddenly the truth hit me like a slap of cold water in the face. And at the same awful, sobering moment I saw that it had been there in front of us all the time if only we'd really looked, if only we'd opened our eyes. 'Oh my God,' I muttered. A sick feeling grabbed the pit of my stomach. Turning quickly, I gripped Maria's wrist and pulled her out of the hut.

We ran through the dust and out across the grass. Lanaians stood aside and watched us go. None tried to follow. Through my mind the sacred words of the Scroll of Priests ran, over and over . . . 'The sons of life, having sprung from seed shall be seed. They shall consume each other and all the senses of the soil, of water and of the atmosphere. They shall consume the ones who bore them and these shall be sacred . . .'

Sprung from seed. Sprung from seed. The phrase tumbled through my mind like an equation. I gripped Maria's arm,

leading her away from the village. Completely bewildered and still weak from the coma, she followed unprotestingly.

Eight

We reached the life-ship and I unlocked the hatch. We dropped inside and I sagged into the control-couch, enjoying the familiar touch and smell of plastic and metal.

Maria stared around the life-ship in abrupt alarm. She suddenly seemed to come alive. 'Jim, for pity's sake! Tell me what's happening!'

'It's Kanlin,' I said, wondering why she hadn't already guessed. 'He was buried in the pool, but he wasn't dead—not really. He was just changed; he had become something else . . .'

I reached for the controls, feeling curiously out of place in just my wet shorts.

Maria lurched towards me. 'I had a dream about Kanlin! I dreamed he was coming back to me. He was standing by the bunk in the hut, and all his friends were there. It was beautiful . . .'

'Strap in,' I snapped. 'We're taking off . . .'

'No, Jim, we *can't* go! If Kanlin didn't die, then I must find him . . .'

'But he *is* dead!' I shouted. 'Can't you understand? He was taking over your mind. I had to destroy him—him and all the others. I had to stop them from destroying *you*!'

She recoiled as if I had struck her. At last it was getting through. At last she realised what terrible thing I'd done. 'You killed——?'

I leapt from the seat and grabbed her arm. 'Get in that couch!'

'No!' Sobbing, she squirmed away from me.

'Listen to me!' I yelled. 'These people are incredibly different from us. We have so much to learn about them before we can even *begin* to teach them anything! The reports didn't get all of it. It was assumed that the Lanaian men stayed away from the villages and the women only

visited them when they wanted children. But it wasn't that way at all! You heard what Kordalia said: there *are* no men! And it was there all the time, there in the Scroll of Priests: "The sons of life, having sprung from seed shall *be* seed . . ." '

But Maria wasn't listening. She was still struggling, weeping hysterically as I dragged her across to the take-off couch. I wanted to scream it at her: scream that the males of this planet were flowers, flowers that probably grew only in the optimum climatic conditions of the Valley of Crimson. Does it sound so impossible—one sex vegetable, one mammal? But it was there. And it was all laid out before us in the Scroll of Priests, if only we'd understood. "And the height of the season of warm the women shall journey to the Valley of Crimson, there to receive the seed and conceive of offspring . . ."

'Don't you see what it means?' I yelled. 'How *totally* alien these people are? How in God's name must they copulate . . .? And the women, carrying the seeds back to the village, most of them giving birth to daughters, and a few to sexless *things*—the Chosen Ones. No wonder I misunderstood for so long. It's all in the translation of their language. How could these concepts possibly be translated from Lanaian to Earthian? And they misunderstood too: our word for "boy" confused with their word for "Chosen One".' I shook my head. 'How could we *fail* to misunderstand . . .'

'No!' Maria stared at me. 'No . . .' Crying, she pulled away and threw herself against the port. In the distance the lights of the village glowed dully against the darkness. There were no Lanaians in sight.

'No,' she whispered. 'I don't believe it . . .'

I gripped her shoulders, tugging her again over to the take-off couch. 'But it's true, Maria. There's no other possibility. Can't you grasp it?'

'Kanlin!' A cold savage light came into her eyes. Suddenly she was fighting against me. 'You killed Kanlin!'

I slapped her hard across the face and pushed her down

into the couch. Before she could react I'd locked the straps into place. I leapt into my own seat and locked myself in. Ignoring her shouts, I pressed the contacts and waited for the power to build up. Then I hit the button.

NINE

ALL THE way up I tried to think how I could explain it to her. What words could I use when I could only just grasp it myself—only just grasp how the Chosen Ones were buried in the Pool of Transference where they took root, metamorphosing almost into vegetables, becoming almost like their 'fathers', their awarenesses fusing into one, powerful enough to link telepathically with each of their mothers' minds, as Kordalia had said. And their mothers going through a metamorphosis of their own, becoming Priest Chiefs, go-betweens for mammal and vegetable, leaders of the race. And the female children, growing up, going to the Valley of Crimson to receive the seed, to begin the whole crazy fantastic cycle again . . .

Four hundred miles out from Lanaia I released her from the couch. For the next hour her eyes avoided mine. She sat with her back to me, staring through the port.

'I saved you,' I told her. 'I threw away *everything* to save you.'

She turned to look at me, her eyes circled and dark. Now she was past even tears.

'Jim,' she said quietly. 'The trouble with you is that you have no confidence in yourself. You just drift along on the line of least resistance, convinced that whatever you're doing you're doing because you believe in it. You never kick back until you feel threatened—and then you *really* kick! You hit out in all directions to restore your own personal status-quo and you expect everyone to love you for it. But I've got news for you—it's just not so.'

Horrified, I stared at her. 'Maria . . .'

But she shook her head.

'I'm committed, Jim. I'm committed and I will be for the

rest of my life to the saving of men's souls—men meaning all sentient beings. But you—you could never be committed to anything other than your own over-inflated ego!'

She gazed at me sadly; but it was a gaze completely without pity. Slowly she turned away. I'd thought I was a true Christian; but I had been able to sacrifice nothing to that faith. In the end I had turned against everything so that I could have the one thing that really mattered to me.

Now I had lost her too.

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